

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

## AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS, BREISOIDEACHAS AGUS ÁRDOIDEACHAS, TAIGHDE, NUÁLAÍOCHT AGUS EOLAÍOCHT

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

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*Déardaoin, 17 Nollaig 2020*

*Thursday, 17 December 2020*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 11.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Colm Burke,*	Aisling Dolan,
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Eileen Flynn,
Thomas Gould,+	Rónán Mullen,
Aindrias Moynihan,+	Fiona O'Loughlin,
Carol Nolan,	Pauline O'Reilly.
Jim O'Callaghan,	
Pádraig O'Sullivan,	
Marc Ó Cathasaigh,	
Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire,	
Aodhán Ó Ríordáin.	

\* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputy Alan Farrell.

+ In éagmais le haghaidh cuid den choiste / In the absence for part of the meeting of Deputies Rose Conway-Walsh and Jim O'Callaghan.

Teachta / Deputy Paul Kehoe sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Educational Disadvantage: Discussion**

**Chairman:** Good morning everybody. Dr. Paul Downes, the director of the Educational Disadvantage Centre of Dublin City University is here today to discuss marginalised students in primary and post-primary DEIS schools and other settings, system gaps in policy and practice, and the priority issues for consideration and with reference to the impact of Covid-19.

I will invite Dr. Downes to make a statement which will be followed by questions from the committee members. Our witnesses are made aware that the committee will publish opening statements following this meeting.

Before I begin I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I ask witnesses to note also that they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentations that they make to the committee today. That means that they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything that they may say at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse the privilege and it is my duty as Chairman to ensure that this privilege is not abused. Therefore if their statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks and it is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

I ask members to be aware with regard to Covid-19 that there are hand sanitisers in front of them and that if they are exchanging seats with a member, they should sanitise the bench and the seat before they leave.

I invite Dr. Downes to make his opening statement. He has five minutes to do so after which committee members have four minutes for questions and answers.

**Dr. Paul Downes:** I thank the Chairman, Deputy Kehoe.

“History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake”, wrote James Joyce. Trauma is a nightmare from which politicians in Ireland need to wake up to regarding children in Irish society today in order to address a glaring system gap, which is the lack of emotional counselling and therapeutic services in and around schools. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills report on early school leaving in 2010 identified trauma then as an issue affecting early school leaving. Our own educational disadvantage centres, formed with DEIS and the INTO, also raised this as a priority issue in 2015. International research in the last decade has accelerated awareness of how mental health and trauma-related issues impact upon school engagement and early school leaving.

The Irish system currently puts teachers in the role of therapists, which is unacceptable. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice of 2018 talks about one good adult, where a teacher is in this role. We need to recognise that career guidance counsellors are not emotional counsellors at the level of therapeutic supports. They are not a substitute for emotional counsellors.

Similarly the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, psychologists do not provide sustained one-to-one counselling support. Across many countries in Europe, and in a 2019 report in which I was involved with the European Commission evaluating the implementation of the Council recommendation of 2011, we see that many European countries have emotional

counsellors and therapists routinely in and around schools. Ireland does not. I appeal to all of the members today to seriously prioritise this issue.

In my submission members will also see a triangle of need, which is a public health model. This is increasingly recognised, and is sometimes called a variant of the Hardiker model of need, where one is looking at the different levels of need. The indicated prevention level of need is that of individuals' specialised chronic need in complex issues. That is the level at which the Irish system currently fails in respect of trauma and supports.

The second priority issued that we have raised in our submission is a related one on alternatives to suspension and expulsion. This is a system absurdity where on the one hand we have a range of services trying to keep young people in school yet we have over 13,000 post-primary students being suspended annually, according to the most recent figures, which is 3.8% of this school-going population. There has been a slight improvement in recent years on that figure but not a great one. A key commitment in the DEIS 2017 action plan was to expand multidisciplinary team supports to primary schools but we need the resources for that. I urge members to also look at that aspect of this issue. There is again international research showing how destructive suspending and expelling youngsters from school is. Our centre's Peter McVerry Trust report of last year highlighted that 25% of homeless men had been suspended from school. Suspension and expulsion is the fast track to homelessness.

A third point I will raise here is on the issue of hot meals in schools. This is something on which significant progress has been made by successive Governments. I also note that child poverty statistics from the last economic crash show that child poverty rose with the fastest acceleration in all of Europe between 2008 and 2011 in a small island on the west coast of Europe called Ireland. We accelerated child poverty more than any other country in Europe and, uniquely, put the burden of child poverty on our children. We must not do that for the forthcoming economic recession. It is very gratifying to see that there are at least steps being taken towards a hot meals provision in schools but this needs to be expanded as part of a phased universalism in schools.

We also raise attention in our submission to the DEIS allocation tool. The policy purposes behind this tool are very concerning in that it may be punishing schools for their success if they attract students from a broader social mix. The tool itself raises a lot of concerns. The other two issues in our submission relate to arts and social inclusion. This is an open goal for policy development. The arts and education strategy is not fit for purpose in regard to arts and social inclusion issues. The arts bring about issues of challenging fear of failure. The other aspect is outdoor education. In the light of Covid, this is another aspect on which we need a strategic approach.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Downes. Deputy Colm Burke will be standing in for Deputy Alan Farrell later in the meeting. I call Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I welcome Dr. Downes. I have been looking forward to this session with him and the Cork Life Centre for the past few weeks. The submission he made is one of the most detailed I have read since I joined the committee and its content and quality are very good. I am specifically interested in the hot meals initiative that he spoke about. We have noticed how, across the water, it was very newsworthy and a famous professional footballer from Manchester United sponsored it. In Ireland, the hot school meals initiative is confined essentially to schools. The one comment I would make is that disadvantaged children do not just attend DEIS schools and disadvantage is quite obvious in all parts of our school society. Will

Dr. Downes comment on the need to further roll out a comprehensive hot meals programme across all schools?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Absolutely. I could not agree more. Our centre set up a working group involving a range of key stakeholders in 2013, advocating for hot meals in schools. The phrase we used was “phased universalism”, prioritising areas of highest need but as part of an overall universal strategy that would go beyond schools, and that gave recognition that poverty and hunger in school is unacceptable in modern society, or in any society. We are playing catch-up with many countries in Europe on this issue, not just the UK. This is a routine fact of life in many European countries. Certainly, I would enthusiastically support a phased universalism in regard to hot meals across the country.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** That would be most welcome. It is something we need to analyse to see if we can roll it out.

Dr. Downes made reference to a Canadian study about depression and how those symptoms manifest in young people, in particular when they transition from primary to secondary school. How does he believe we can best identify those symptoms early, so we can identify those vulnerable students to ensure they get the appropriate intervention they need? At the minute, they get lost during that transition. How can we improve on that?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** The Cornell study examined depression and early school leaving, and there is a range of underlying factors for that. For the transition issue, we also need to consider school climate issues such as bullying in the transition from primary to post-primary. We need a positive school climate, which comes back to preparation of teachers and the need to develop the conflict resolution skills of teachers at secondary school level. It is not just an individualised phenomenon; it is about a relational culture. Again, I go back to the role the role of emotional councillors, play therapists and art therapists, and non-verbal approaches, and the need to emphasise that aspect. By getting issues early, before they snowball, we are getting the youngsters before it mushrooms into a level of clinical depression. Without the adequate support services, where youngsters are appealing for someone to listen to them in the school system, a specialised counselling support service is needed but we do not have that currently.

To go back to the point on hot meals, hunger is a hidden issue. There is still a stigma around being hungry and around poverty. Whereas we would perhaps be more open in society about many other issues that previously had stigma around them, poverty and hunger are still issues people are afraid to own up to.

Early intervention is a key aspect to stop small problems mushrooming. That is why we need the emotional counselling support services.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** We engage most with the whole issue of educational disadvantage every September, when university places are handed out and we talk about the disparity between certain schools. While I am under no illusion that universities can do more and that we can do more to help many post-primary schools, it seems that very often we miss the point that an awful lot of children are behind from the time they start primary school, and that disadvantage is built into the education system, as it is into many systems, from a very early age.

I want to focus on a few points in the submission. First, the area of adverse childhood experience is becoming more and more prominent and Dr. Jane Mulcahy from my own neck of the

woods has focused on this a lot recently. Dr. Downes spoke about play therapy and art therapy, which would be very beneficial. Is this something he has come across? We regularly experience that the lack of access to services such as speech and language therapy is a severe problem. Is the lack of access to such therapies compounding educational disadvantage?

Deputy O'Sullivan raised the point on hot meals, which I have raised on a number of occasions. Not to undermine any of the positive developments that have happened in recent times, we have a profoundly underdeveloped school meals system. Where it exists, it is mostly cold food and is limited, and hot meals are a subset of DEIS band 1 schools. I agree that has to be rapidly expanded.

Dr. Downes was engaged in the latest consultation on DEIS. The geographic profile of disadvantage has probably changed a bit and because of the housing assistant payment, HAP, it is more dispersed. An opportunity was missed with the expansion of DEIS in that there was no DEIS band 2. Many schools might not be in the very disadvantaged category but they could still benefit from home-school liaison, school completion and so on, but no extra schools were brought into that. If Dr. Downes was to reimagine how DEIS was structured and the additional supports that would be involved, how would he go about that? What does he think DEIS needs to do to deliver? While it does a lot of good, I would like to hear how it might go even further in tackling disadvantage.

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Three headline points around what we need are emotional counselling services, hot meals and speech and language therapy. Speech and language therapy is now Government policy and there have been significant developments in the past few years on that aspect. I also note the huge success of DEIS in terms of educational outcomes, and I noted it in the submission. DEIS has been a major protective factor, a glue in society to hold things together against the backdrop of astonishing rates of increase in child poverty. There are many successes in DEIS in terms of improvements on early school leaving, maths, reading and school attendance. There have been many gains. We cannot tear up this model. Speech and language is coming in more and it is Government policy to bring that through. Our centre worked on developing a three-pronged model of speech and language therapy in Ballyfermot some years ago, which worked with parents, teachers and individual children. It is something schools have been crying out for over the years.

There is also the issue of the suspension and expulsion point. Often, some of the aggression issues are linked to language issues, so speech and language is a key aspect. It is in our submission in regard to alternatives to suspension and expulsion.

I have emphasised the therapeutic points. We need a much bigger roll-out and a national commitment to art and play therapists and non-verbal approaches in the younger years, as well as emotional counsellors in the older years. I note the universities routinely have emotional counsellors. It is almost as though State policy thinks that emotions begin when people are aged 18, which is psychological nonsense. We need to recognise that children's emotions matter and that they are crying out for these supports. I was invited to Comhairle na nÓg in Dublin a few years ago. Its priority issue was emotional counsellors in schools but it fell on the deaf ears of policymakers at that time. I am hoping that some of those in this room today could drive that issue and I appeal to them to do that.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** I thank Dr. Downes for his submission and for being with us here today. He has said many interesting things. I was struck when Dr. Downes mentioned the hunger and the stigma. I seem to recall the late, great Kerry writer Bryan MacMahon writing once

upon a time about introducing soup into schools for impoverished children and the old notion of the “souper” was invoked causing many of the children most in need to retreat in shame. It is terrible that these problems manifest themselves even in our relatively affluent times.

Dr. Downes talked about less harmful alternatives to suspension, expulsion and reduced timetables. There has been a problem with the excessive use of reduced timetables to deal with challenges in the classroom. That has been spoken about on a good many occasions in here in the past number of years. He is talking about multidisciplinary teams being part of the alternative to that. What type of disciplines has he in mind? Can that be achieved in a cost-effective and available way? There are 3,000 schools in the country. Many of those schools will need those kind of multidisciplinary teams from time to time. If Dr. Downes could say something to that, I would be grateful.

The other issue I will ask him about, because time is limited, is mental health. It never seems to go away. Obviously, Covid has brought particular challenges, but why are we in this situation with mental health being such a recurring issue? Is it merely the human condition or is it something about the way we live our lives now? What is causing this? Much of our time in here is spent talking about how we address these problems, but why are they with us?

Finally, Dr. Downes said that our failure to provide emotional counselling and therapeutic services is radically out of step with many European countries. Is that really true?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** On the Senator’s final point, I named those countries in the submission. In our report for the European Commission where we were evaluating the implementation of the European Council recommendation on early school leaving, there was a list of the various countries that have most of the counselling support services. Off the top of my head, they include the Czech Republic, Croatia, Belgium and Sweden. There are a number of countries. They are named in the submission. There is a range of socio-economic mixes of countries.

On the Senator’s multidisciplinary teams point, there is a team for every school in Denmark. I am not even looking for that right now. I am looking for a multidisciplinary team for clusters of schools. What was formerly the national behavioural support service, which has moved into the inclusion service, has moved in this direction regarding suspension-expulsion and having some occupational therapists on board, and speech and language therapists. The significance of the DEIS action plan in 2017 was that it committed to expanding that to primary schools but we are not seeing the resources behind that for primary schools.

The reduced timetable issue is a form of suspension. The schools need to have the supports there where the child may be withdrawn from the class but not from the school. It is not rocket science.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Occupational therapists?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Speech and language therapists and emotional counsellors. Many of the youngsters may be experiencing trauma. Our Peter McVerry Trust study last year showed that two thirds of homeless men experienced childhood trauma and a quarter of those were suspended from school. One has a situation where we are dealing with traumatised children by expelling and suspending them. This is not a sane policy strategy.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** What of the bigger question about mental health and why we are where we are now?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** There has to be a positive vision about how we want our children to enjoy their lives. That is probably the final two parts of our submission, which were around the arts and social inclusion in education and meaning making. That aspect involves promoting inclusive systems as well as relative poverty issues.

Outdoor education is increasingly coming to the fore at European Commission level in light of Covid. How can we reconstruct? In the sixth point of our submission, we also talk about pride in local community, how to develop active citizenship and a sense of agency in children. I much prefer the term “agency” to “resilience” in children, and giving children voice, power, a say over their lives but also alleviating poverty. Outdoor education is also an alternative to excessive screen time where they are not just zombies looking at screens all day. There is that aspect.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I thank Dr. Downes for an extremely comprehensive opening statement. I note that Dr. Susan Pike was also involved in putting this together. I point Dr. Downes at the system gap No. 6 to give him more time to talk about that provision, particularly children’s geographies, how they understand their own environment, and that provision of the outdoor learning space, in particular, in marginalised communities. I will give him a good three-and-a-half minute run at it.

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Dr. Pike has developed projects in Coolock and in Ballygall, Finglas which are looking at young people engaging with their local community, being proud of their local community, and having a voice and active citizenship in their local community. It is also a part of seeing the school as an expansion of the community. It is a whole-community approach to learning.

There is also the issue of outdoor education here. I will also link that in with something we have also been working on. One of the new EU key competences for lifelong learning is personal, social and learning to learn. The learning-to-learn part was always there but the personal and social development part was not there at the EU key competence level. What we are looking at now is how social and emotional education aspects can be combined with the active citizenship and children’s geographies pride-in-locality aspect, and, of course, team work, decision-making and love of nature. We need our schools to be much more organic. Certain schools are sterile environments. Many schools are recognising the love of nature that youngsters have. Therefore, there is the nature aspect. There is also the part that this can bring diverse ethnic groups together as well to collaborate on common tasks.

I would also raise the issue of how after-school services in areas of poverty and marginalisation have somewhat been cut back over a number of years. Even when I started doing research in Ballyfermot in 2002, there was a sense that the after-school settings were no longer as good as they had been in previous decades. There was already a retreat from the after-school service there. The school completion programme has retreated a lot from after-school also for a broad mix of youngsters. We need to look at how the after-school setting can combine an arts and social inclusion strategy and the outdoor and children’s geographies part so that we have a strategy vision of what we want our children to engage in. These are open goals. They are missed opportunities - the outdoor education and the arts aspect. To entwine those two as well, there are significant ways, for instance, by giving people aesthetic control over their environment with murals, in which people can feel not only that they belong to the community but that they are leaders in their community.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I invite Dr. Downes to comment on the potential of school

gardens. Gardening is one of the therapeutic activities for all. There is considerable scope for those children, particularly children suffering from trauma, to participate in a such a very positive experience. Dr. Downes might have a 20-second window for that.

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Essentially, this is something that could be routinely built into schools as much as we have many other aspects that are seen. These are not expensive.

The other point I would mention here is animals in schools. I am not talking lions and tigers, but we have had examples of pens in schools in the Tallaght area where youngsters are given responsibility to work with the animals and it motivates them to come to school.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I thank Dr. Downes.

**Chairman:** Deputy Ó Ríordáin will be followed by Senator Dolan.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** I wish I had 45 minutes, not just four. We should look into the idea of producing a committee report on the issue of trauma, particularly in primary and secondary schools.

I thank Dr. Downes for his presentation. I do not know where to start. Does he accept that we cannot solve educational disadvantage within the school structure and that there is a large number of issues that happen before children ever get to school? We are familiar with the issue raised in the Hart and Risley study and the fact that if we take two three-year-olds from different backgrounds, as I often cite, with one three-year-old from a disadvantaged background and another three-year-old from a more mainstream background, there is a difference in their oral language capacity. Significant investment has to happen before a child ever gets to primary or secondary school.

I refer also to the way that we structure the system, in particular, at second level, where it is not a State system but a State-funded system. We, therefore, have all this competition between schools, which means that there are schools that parents are trying to get their children into, there is a kind of layering underneath that and at the bottom there tends to be a school that has a disproportionate number of Traveller children, migrant children, children with special needs and children who have been suspended or expelled from other schools. It is not fair, but that is the system we have constructed. It is not a State system, but a competition system, and perhaps Dr. Downes would like to comment on that aspect.

Could he also speak about trauma and the issue of addiction? Having worked in that area, I know that addiction, especially with substance abuse, involves people trying to deal with pain. We do not like talking about pain and trauma in Irish society, because it is often felt to be an issue of failure. People, however, are suffering pain and walking around with pain that has been there a long time. It can also be intergenerational pain, which has been handed down to people.

Those are some of my initial thoughts that I wanted to set out for Dr. Downes. I referred to the preschool element, that children do not live in schools and the question of how we can bridge the gap between what happens in schools and activity in the wider community. I also spoke about how structural inequality is built into the system, and we are always going to struggle with this issue until we crack that aspect. I finished by referring to the need to make the link between trauma and addiction and having a proper conversation on that connection.

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Taking the Deputy's last point first, on trauma, drug use and addiction, it is certainly an escape and a flight from pain. We need support services involved early, so

we can stop the pain mushrooming. People experience trauma and then try to block out the pain by taking drugs, or whatever, and then other things spring from that situation. The early intervention aspect needs to address that aspect. I again cannot emphasise enough the value of therapeutic play and art approaches in the early years.

Turning to the Deputy's first point, I note that Eurochild called in 2011 for one-stop-shop community centres, which would have multidisciplinary team aspects. Family centres, which have these one-stop-shops, have been rolled out in Nordrhein-Westfalen in Germany and in SPIL centres in Eindhoven. They are focused on early years, but also bring in the multidisciplinary aspects from the start so there is no wait until children are five or six years old for intervention with speech and language issues. There is also the issue of educating people, including secondary school students, about being parents and developing a culture of relation and communication. Why is it necessary to wait until people are parents, or the provision of parenting courses just after a child arrives, before educating them about being parents? This is about the culture of habits and communication that we need to bring into our curriculum. A life skills curriculum was appealed for passionately by many of the homeless men in our Peter McVerry Trust study. We do not have an adequate life skills curriculum now.

Moving on to structural inequalities across schools, socio-economic inequality as well as educational apartheid occur across the school system. One of the concerns we expressed in our submission is that more money is needed for DEIS schools. Rather than focusing on a tool that takes things from one school to give to another, more money should go to the DEIS schools. There is an issue concerning the allocation of State funds to private schools, and that is an issue which we must have a hard look at if we are going to talk about where our priorities are as a country.

We may also need to broaden our concept of a school. We might need to develop the idea that teachers could be shared across different schools. It often strikes me that there is an option for teachers to move across schools, but it is rarely taken up. We could, however, have a system where people could move for two years between schools to create a freshening of institutional cultures. The option exists, at primary school level certainly, for teachers to move across schools and it is something which could foster collaboration between schools. I take the Deputy's point regarding the structural inequality aspect, however.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Downes. I call Senator Dolan.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I welcome Dr. Downes, and I look forward to catching up with him again regarding this interesting topic. It is wonderful to have the Educational Disadvantage Centre in DCU, but Ballinasloe, where I come from takes in east Galway and south Roscommon, is second, after Darndale, in the Pobal deprivation index. It is the only school in DEIS band 1 at primary level in County Galway. We do not have any in that category at post-primary level. I am very interested in what Dr. Downes has mentioned. I am interested in and supportive of the hot meals initiative. The school meals programme has been continued during the Covid-19 pandemic. I refer as well to the decrease Dr. Downes mentioned in early school leaving. Is that related to the impact of DEIS?

On access to speech and language services, is that becoming an issue? It has been a difficult issue for the school in my area. Does that apply across the board to DEIS schools?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Improving access to speech and language services requires that we produce more speech and language therapists because there is a national shortage. We have an ac-

celerated focus on the importance of speech and language therapists in schools and this means we must look at how we expand that cohort so it is not just a small group. Will the Senator remind me of her point regarding the hot meals programme?

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** The hot meals programme was expanded during the Covid-19 pandemic. My interest in that area is that we would be able to expand that programme at post-primary level, particularly in DEIS areas, by which I mean that where there is a DEIS primary school, there would be a focus on both.

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Many youngsters in secondary schools have told me that the benefit of having hot meals in schools impacted not just on hunger but on the whole atmosphere of the school. People were getting on better and were less ratty with each other and morale improved. That is not rocket science. Hunger affects concentration, motivation, memory and interaction with other people, as does sleep, and how those aspects interact. Within the phased move towards universalism for hot meals in schools, it would be possible to operate a system where everybody in a school has a voucher. Some people may have paid or contributed to the purchase of vouchers, but nobody will know if that is the case. That kind of system exists in France, where everybody receives the provision, and there are different levels of contribution, but the system is anonymous and nobody knows who is paying. I am not quite sure, but in France maybe even the school does not know who has contributed. This issue, therefore, is one which cuts across Irish society, rural and urban. The Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating the problem and we must address it.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I thank Dr. Downes. Turning to child poverty, I saw the statistics mentioned in the opening submission. On creativity in schools and investment in the arts, I listened to Sir Ken Robinson, who recently passed away, talking about the importance of creativity in schools, especially in areas of disadvantage, where it reduced early school leaving. What types of art and creative endeavours would Dr. Downes recommend as a first step in schools?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Process drama is one methodology that colleagues in our centre have published on in some detail over the years, and there is a major opportunity in that area. It can help to develop skills in conflict resolution, voice utilisation and public speaking. Empathy and perspective taking are also important skills in process drama. I would not argue for the prioritisation of one section of the arts over others, however. The visual arts and dance are also valuable. Recent research on music has also highlighted that even being a member of a choir or a band leads to higher scores on a range of educational outcomes, including skills such as building concentration, as well as social skills. I cannot emphasise enough the dearth of strategic policy in respect of the arts and social inclusion at national level. We do not have a well-thought-out arts and social inclusion strategy and we need one.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** The strategy should be integrated into the educational system, even in regional areas.

**Chairman:** I thank Senator Dolan and Dr. Downes. We move on to Deputy Conway-Walsh, who will be followed by Senator Pauline O'Reilly, if other members who are designated to speak do not come in beforehand. I call Deputy Conway-Walsh.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank Dr. Downes for his presentation. I needed to be in my office but I watched it on the screen. Unfortunately, I was interrupted a few times. I hope he will forgive me if I ask a question that he may already have addressed.

When we consider the basic needs of children in school, the first thing we must do is make sure there are no children in the classroom who are hungry. How big a problem do we still have in terms of children sitting hungry in classrooms?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Going back to Celtic tiger times, where our centre first looked at this issue, we saw that there was a big variation between schools. In DEIS schools, for example, a study done in Dublin 8, in The Liberties, at a time when the country was never wealthier, showed a range of between 6% of youngsters being too hungry to do their work in school and up to 33%, or a third, of children in some schools. These were local studies done at the time and there was a range across schools. On average, the studies found that, even in Celtic tiger times, some 18% of children were too hungry to do their work in school. That was the situation then. There have been national studies since which consistently point to there being one in five children who say they either go to bed or to school hungry. They are Health Protection Surveillance Centre, HPSC, studies.

A problem with the breakfast clubs aspect is that a lot of the youngsters most in need may not get into school in time for them. I want to move away from there being committees of professionals paid to decide which children are supposedly poor enough to merit getting food and which are not. We need to get away from putting money into having professionals making arbitrary and intrusive decisions, without knowing all the information, instead of just giving the food to children. It is not that difficult.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Exactly. I would like to have further conversations with Dr. Downes on this aspect but I am very limited in the time available to me. I want to talk about the legislation that was introduced recently in Wales which places an obligation on the police to inform teachers when there is domestic violence in a pupil's home. A lot of issues in this regard can be solved, and have been solved over the years, by really good teachers who can pick up the indications of what is going on at home and what is happening for the child. I have two questions for Dr. Downes in this regard. First, how important does he think it is that similar legislation should be brought in here? Second, is there enough within the teacher training system to equip teachers to identify the real needs of children in this aspect and to address those needs?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** I would take a slightly different perspective and say that schools need to know about such issues but they cannot necessarily act on them. First of all, teachers cannot be therapists, as I mentioned earlier. In terms of the triangle of need aspect, to which I referred, there are universal mentoring and caring approaches and listening skills which teachers would have. As illustrated on the screen, the triangle of need is a well-recognised public health model of differentiated need. At the universal level, teachers absolutely need those skills, and more of them, and that is something we work on. Conflict resolution skills are an aspect I would strongly emphasise as something we need more of in the initial teacher education field at secondary school level. However, multidisciplinary teams in and around schools would be the appropriate place to deal with those issues. This is where we move into the area of trauma, and domestic violence is one of the indicators of adverse childhood experience.

Schools need to be reconfigured in order that they also function as a health setting. There are nurses in every school in France, for instance. Ireland has divided health and education in the way we think about schools. Schools need to have the right multidisciplinary support services in and around them. The phrase "in and around" means that such services might be located in a community setting but would go into schools. There are issues of privacy, confidentiality and trust in this regard and the possibility of pitting parents against schools. It is a somewhat fraught issue. We also need to make sure schools have the resources to cope and be

able to offer the right supports. We see with suspensions, reduced timetabling and the issues that arise in this regard that we are not adequately equipping schools in that respect.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** We could speak and listen to Dr. Downes all day. I commend his passion and creativity. We have spoken to several people about these issues and what is often missing is a level of creativity in how to address them. Some of the issues Dr. Downes spoke about, including the idea of breaking down the notion of what a school is, really appeal to me. We often talk about schooling as being only about academics but, in fact, learning is also to do with learning about one's society and being an active participant in that society. I wonder about the idea of universality. Obviously, there must be targeted supports in place but universality would mean not picking people out and identifying them as the problem. Instead, it would be looking at things across the board.

Having multidisciplinary teams in place makes sense as the approach we should follow. Dr. Downes pointed to strategies around arts and other aspects. I wonder how we can bring all of that together in one package in order that we can assess what we are trying to achieve and everything that is required to achieve it. My colleague mentioned outdoor education. Citizenship is an important consideration. The idea is that schools could be places that change society and that the children can change their own environment.

Can Dr. Downes talk about what can be done as a whole in terms of taking this opportunity to tackle disadvantage? I am referring here not just to DEIS schools. In my own constituency, there are a lot of rural schools, which are not necessarily in the DEIS programme, where there is disadvantage right across the board. That is not being picked up because of the lack of a multidisciplinary approach and because the schools are not identified as DEIS schools where there are certain needs to be met.

**Dr. Paul Downes:** We could move towards area-based approaches where we are not just focusing on which school gets DEIS status and which does not. We have the area-based childhood programme, which is ripe for evolution and in respect of which a multidisciplinary team aspect is being introduced. For example, there is a Limerick wrap-around model that is taking an area-based approach. I would emphasise the point that community-based multidisciplinary teams can work as gateways. We see this with FamiliBase in Ballyfermot. One might have a wider youth project focusing on the arts or other issues, for instance, which brings in a range of youngsters in a setting in which they are comfortable, and those youngsters may have some other higher-level needs. They know the people in that setting and they feel at home there. It is not an alien place to them and they know that if something else is coming up for them, they can go to the other, more specialised services.

That is something we have worked on at European level. It is the gateway principle whereby one brings in a wider cohort of youngsters at community level, with the more specialised services being co-located. It is about stopping the fragmentation of services and having co-location of services at community level. I have argued in my own work with our centre that we need a both-and model of community and school-based approaches. We are calling here today for a strategic vision that would integrate the arts and social inclusion, outdoor education and children's geographies, which incorporate the citizenship aspect as well, with social and emotional education. We can bring all those aspects together with a strong social inclusion focus that is area-wide and not just school-based.

Non-formal education is a key aspect of this. A lot of our work at European Commission level has been pushing for community-based lifelong learning centres. That was also a recom-

mentation of our Peter McVerry Trust report. A lot of the homeless men who were surveyed wanted somewhere to go that would be a space where they could meet other people. Community lifelong centres could reach a lot of those goals. It is not like we have to pick this from the stars. There are examples of it already in Ireland, such as An Cosán in Tallaght. We already have models which combine wider educational goals, community development goals and the more specialist services.

**Chairman:** We must move on to the next speaker in order to give everybody an opportunity before the time is up.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** I have greatly appreciated listening to Dr. Downes and reading the report he submitted. In terms of providing therapeutic and counselling support for young children in school, how does he think that would operate in practice and what is his experience from other European countries as to how it works? Do the teachers provide it or are separate supports brought into schools?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** I want to be very clear about the role of teachers regarding pupils’ mental health. Teachers have a listening role in mental health promotion and stress prevention but they are not therapeutic supports. Teachers cannot offer emotional counselling for complex needs issues. Unless career guidance teachers have qualifications additional to career guidance, that is not their role. Teachers are not therapists and we need therapists in schools.

In terms of how this would be rolled out, my preference is to give children a choice. This comes back to community-based multidisciplinary teams, such as models that were devised by the Familiscope project in Ballyfermot over a decade ago. That was a both-and model in which children could decide to talk to somebody they know in school, as many want to do. Others may feel they do not trust the school enough. They would not open up in a school setting but they would open up in a community setting. In my view, the initial conversations would be with the counsellor on the school site but then, perhaps after school, they would continue with the same counsellor somewhere else. A few years ago, I came across eight-week bereavement counselling courses. One cannot get over the death of a parent or a suicide in eight weeks. This creates a situation where the child opens up, gains trust and puts huge amount of energy into somebody who then disappears, replicating the loss of the parent. We must have sustained supports around emotional counselling and therapy.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** I am conscious that we cannot put all of society’s responsibilities on to teachers. Who initially should be able to identify that a child needs counselling and therapy? Is that a function of the teacher?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** At secondary level, many of the students could self-refer as they know when they are in crisis. At primary level, certainly if it is on the school side, it should be the teachers. Maybe the children may want to talk to somebody. When they are stressed they may communicate that to the teacher. Certainly the teacher may suspect something is going on. The teacher should certainly have a role. The European Commission would argue that teachers would have a role in identifying youngsters who may be in need but they would not provide the support. There is also a privacy issue for the child. Many children do not want to open up to teachers and they will state that.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** I am not surprised by the correlation in the report between suspensions, expulsions and homelessness later on in life. That view supports what many of us have seen in our communities. What should be done in school for a child who has behavioural

issues that affect other children? What is the remedy for the school with that child?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** They may have to be withdrawn from class for a period but not from the school. We often hear the term “individual education plan” or IEP. We need an individual education and well-being plan that takes the holistic needs of the child and his or her voice into account. This also applies to the perpetrators of bullying, for example. Research shows that it can be predicted by the age of seven years that an entrenched bullying perpetrator is a red flag for psychiatric problems and criminality years later. We need to intervene early with them with multidisciplinary team support in and around the schools. The argument is to have a multidisciplinary team in a cluster of schools that could rotate according to the priority need of youngsters. We also need something that is quick and flexible because a child may be in crisis and act out on a particular day. The response, therefore, needs to be flexible, not one where we must wait for six months due to an endless chain of referrals.

**Senator Fiona O’Loughlin:** I listened in my office to the fascinating presentation made by Dr. Downes. He presented a true and realistic picture of where we are at and what we need to do to move forward, particularly the pathway and way the education system needs to interact informally with the community and other organisations to support children or young adults who are in crisis situations in trying to move their lives forward. The toxicity of stress on children who are in difficult situations is very much borne out in research, particularly from the United States, which I read about while listening to the presentation.

Research has shown that schools with DEIS status are not making a major difference. While they have delivered a better return in terms of literacy and numeracy, that has also happened in non-DEIS schools. More interventions need to be made. I am particularly concerned about children who suffer from disadvantage but are not in DEIS schools. They are not captured in terms of the extra supports that are needed, for example, hot meals in schools. How can we support children in non-DEIS schools?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Our submission goes into some detail about concerns around the new DEIS allocation tool. I am delighted the Senator raised that issue because I want to draw a matter to the attention of the committee. The DEIS 2017 action plan talks about cutting resources from some DEIS schools to give to other DEIS schools. This is very concerning. The focus on the tool is a substitute for investment. We need more money to expand the DEIS schools. Ireland and the Netherlands are the two countries in Europe that have shown year-on-year decreases in early school-leaving over the last decade. The current DEIS schools system has made a substantial contribution to that reduction in early school-leaving but there are big concerns both with the policy purposes behind the new tool in development and the tool itself. The concern with the policy purposes is that it will punish schools for their success in attracting a broader mix of students or in educating parents with home-school liaison to higher education attainment, as a result of which the school no longer meets the eligibility criteria for the DEIS function. We need to move away from a pass the parcel approach of resources between schools and pitting schools against each other. I ask the committee to commit to a principle of having no cuts to current DEIS schools, particularly against the backdrop of child poverty and the recession that will be caused by Covid.

The DEIS 2005 action plan committed an extra €40 million in funding per year. The DEIS 2017 action plan committed an extra €5 million in funding in 2017 and only €15 million in 2018, much less than in 2005. We need more money for DEIS to expand to cover more schools.

Regarding the proposed tool, the big concern is that it does not factor in mental health is-

sues, crime issues, gangland issues and homelessness. It is a blunt instrument. In Scotland, crime and mental health issues are factored into the deprivation index. The proposed tool, as it stands, does not do so. The concerns are that it is a blunt instrument and the policy purposes behind it are ill conceived in the DEIS action plan.

**Chairman:** Dr. Downes spoke about the importance of after-school services, arts and creative activities. I presume that includes sport. It is important that people are involved in something outside of school.

It takes some effort to convince people of the importance of the hot meals programme. An awful lot of people believe that because they made their own lunches for school students should bring their own lunches. I ask Dr. Downes to outline the importance of hot meals in schools in simple language.

Dr. Downes made the point that in many cases the breakfast programme does not reach the children most in need because they do not get to school on time. That is true and it is a big problem. I am not sure how we can solve that problem.

Dr. Downes stated that suspending students should not be the policy. What is the alternative? There has to be some form of punishment for bad behaviour. If a child in primary or secondary education is continually bold, what is the alternative to suspension? Suspension has a huge effect on a child. Children who are repeatedly suspended will give up on school because they will feel the school or system has given up on them. These children will give up on school because they will feel school, or the system, is giving up on them. The other issue is the danger of screen time for children and the effects it can have on them. Dr. Downes stated there is a nurse in every school in France. What are the advantages of having such a service in a school? What do the nurses do in schools in France that they could be doing here if we had such a service?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Regarding the advantage of hot meals in schools, almost every educational outcome we want for a child will be affected if the child is hungry. Academic performance, concentration, memory, motivation, engagement with other people and engagement with teacher discipline will stop if the child is hungry in schools and every single educational outcome a state can imagine will be impacted. We see the background data to show there are reports of high levels of youngsters going to school hungry. Some people in Ireland resist it for some reason but in the European context it is routine. Many European countries, not only Finland, where this takes place are listed in the submission.

Regarding alternatives to suspension, the point made is that we have individual educational and well-being plans for these children. We take them out of the classroom and not the school. I question whether it is even a punishment from the children's perspective if they hate school and we tell them they are not going to school today. In the short term it is probably giving some of them something they want because they do not want to be in school. We are trying to get away from a punitive approach to a more psychologically focused approach to find out what are the issues going on and why are the children aggressive in class. Is it because they have been bullied themselves and are trying to be extra macho? Do they feel the teacher is not on their side? Is it a personality clash? Is there a trauma? The multidisciplinary team is there, particularly the emotional counsellors, which I have been emphasising. Emotional counsellors and therapeutic supports are the first port of call for these youngsters to hear what are the issues that may be going on during the school day.

**Chairman:** Does Dr. Downes have information on the nurse service in France?

**Dr. Paul Downes:** I do not propose a nurse in every school in Ireland. It is what France does but my point is that it is done there because health and education are seen as being interlinked. I would argue for giving more priority to emotional therapists, speech and language therapists and even occupational therapists in schools.

**Chairman:** I also asked about the effect of screen time on children.

**Dr. Paul Downes:** Part of this issue is the motivation underlying why somebody goes into screen time. Often it can be to escape social interaction. Yesterday, I was on a bus watching a particular group coming out from school and they all reached for their phones immediately and did not speak to each other. It can be as an excuse not to interact with others. It is a retreat. There is a vacuum that is being filled by the screen. If people have other things to do, such as a proactive arts and outdoor education strategy, there are meaningful activities to engage in. Some of the screen time can be very meaningful also but we should have a diversity of approach. The issue is the intensity of time on the screen. We need to educate people's experiences and not just their minds. An holistic educational system would create various ways in which children have avenues to channel their energies. I agree very much with regard to sport and I include sport in outdoor education and the arts aspect as a strategy for social inclusion.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I apologise for being unavoidably late. I thank Dr. Downes. What I have heard since I arrived has been very interesting. I was a teacher for 12 years so I have a particular interest in this area. What are Dr. Downes's thoughts on reinstating the educational disadvantage committee? In 2017, I brought forward a Bill. The committee seemed to have worked very well when it was in place. Without putting Dr. Downes on the spot I want to know his thoughts on it.

A very interesting point was raised in the Educational Disadvantage Centre's briefing note with regard to schools no longer being able to refer children to the child and adult mental health services. There was also a lot a mention of children's mental health, abuse and trauma and the impact these can have on educational outcomes. This is a huge problem. My colleague, Deputy Mattie McGrath, received information from Tusla that more than 248,000 referrals in all categories of child abuse, including physical and sexual abuse, were made during the period from 2011 to 2016. Perhaps Dr. Downes will speak on this and give his thoughts on it. The sheer scale of the challenge these numbers represent is very concerning with regard to adverse educational outcomes, especially for the children involved.

**Dr. Paul Downes:** On the point on referral to the child and adult mental health services, I would argue that there needs to be an intermediate step before this. Not all children who have been traumatised need to go through that high clinical level of intervention. We have a continuum of risk and there is a wide range of youngsters. Again, it is about early intervention to stop the problems mushrooming. We get in early so we do not need to refer them to the child and adult mental health services a few years later. This is where emotional counselling, play therapy and art therapy approaches come in, to stop the need for this to happen. This is the priority.

Regarding the educational disadvantage committee, many speakers today have pointed out the need to have more time to develop these. If we look at the documents of the previous committee that was established and the DEIS action plan that came after it, there would not a huge overlap between the two. We need the civil servants committed to integrate with the statutory

committee to support reinstating this statutory committee. This area should be prioritised. It has fallen off the radar somewhat in public discourse and we want it back at the centre. The Covid pandemic is forcing us to do this. The Covid pandemic is another reason to reinstate the committee.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Downes for coming before the committee. The discussion has been very beneficial and informative for all of the committee and everybody has received valuable insight into his knowledge and expertise. I thank him for being very frank with his replies and for keeping within the time limits. I have no doubt Dr Downes will come before the committee again in the not too distant future.

**Dr. Paul Downes:** I thank the committee for the invitation.

*The joint committee went into private session at 12.38 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.40 p.m.*

### **Early School Leavers and Alternative Education: Discussion**

**Chairman:** I am sorry for rushing everybody but because of Covid-19 restrictions we try to limit the meetings to one hour. I welcome Mr. Don O’Leary, director, Ms Caoimhe Cotter, current student, and Mr. Rhys Wooten, former student, of the Cork Life Centre. The witnesses are here to discuss early school-leavers and the goal of alternative education with reference to the resourcing and recognition of alternative education settings. I will invite the witnesses to make a brief opening statement, which will be followed by questions from members of the committee. The committee will publish the opening statement on its website following today’s meeting.

I remind members of the longstanding parliamentary practice, which they all know. I remind the witnesses that they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentations that they make to the committee today. This means that they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything that they may say at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse the privilege and it is my duty as Chairman to ensure that this privilege is not abused. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed by me to discontinue their remarks and it is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

I invite Mr. O’Leary to make his opening statement for three minutes, followed by Ms Cotter for one minute and she will be followed by Mr. Wooten for another minute. The witnesses have five minutes in total and then members will have four minutes each to ask questions and for the witnesses to reply. I will call on speakers to conclude their remarks after four minutes.

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** I start by thanking the committee for giving us the opportunity to put our case before it for the recognition of alternative education as a vital lifeline for many students for whom mainstream education does not work and connected to that is a case for recognition and adequate, sustainable funding for the Cork Life Centre. I am joined by two students of the Cork Life Centre, who will tell the committee about their experience of the centre and the difference it has made in their lives. The Cork Life Centre is an alternative education provider. We are not mainstream and we do not aim to be mainstream. We exist because mainstream education has not worked for the students who come to us. Without the service we provide, our

students would very likely have been lost to the education system. We aim to do everything a school does and more. We are committed to and have been successful in keeping children and young people engaged with education in Cork for the past 20 years. We offer junior certificate, leaving certificate and other certifications. In our longer submission, members will see how successful we are in getting results, not just in exams but under a range of headings. In our 20 years in operation, we have worked alongside many State agencies which know our work and send students to us. They recognise the need for what we provide, but we are not formally recognised and our funding is, to say the least, minimal and precarious. We have attached an appendix to the main document showing our current funding and the source of it. Our appeal to the committee today is to take up the recognition of alternative education and to bring the Minister for Education and her officials before it to ask why Cork Life Centre is not recognised, why alternative education in Ireland is not recognised and to change that.

I will hand over to Ms Caoimhe Cotter who is going to speak about her experience of the Cork Life Centre.

**Ms Caoimhe Cotter:** I started secondary education in a mainstream school because it was where all my friends went and I had been perfectly fine in primary so there was no need to look for other options. I had a really hard time trying to adjust to this new school that had over three times the amount of students as my previous school. It felt like the world was caving in on me and I quickly developed an anxiety disorder. My parents talked to the principal and came to the agreement that I would go into school three days a week, in between appointments at the doctor or CAMHS. That might work for some, but it just made me even more stressed out and, at that point, the adults in my life came to terms with the idea that maybe mainstream school was not for me. I was close to 13 when I joined the Cork Life Centre. I was a shy and reserved child with no confidence. I could barely leave my house or talk to anybody at all. It was when I could not even get out of my mam's car any more that Don stepped in. He came to the car and took me into school himself and even though he was helping a student, he treated me like an equal, like a friend. Now, three years later, right after my 16th birthday, I have accomplished so much that I never thought I would be able to do. I went from being a child who did not think she would live past 14 to standing here talking in front of the Oireachtas, all thanks to my school.

**Mr. Rhys Wooten:** My experience in mainstream school was not a positive one. It was definitely not good for my physical health and it bordered on being dangerous for my mental health. Alongside anxiety, I began suffering panic attacks, caused by my experience of school. All of this took a toll on my physical health, my immune system weakened, depression intensified and I began self-harming. I forced myself to keep up with school work and strived relentlessly to excel, trying to study, do my homework and to make sure I had everything so that there was no reason to be singled out by a teacher. I was so scared of my teachers that I could not even write my name sometimes. Then I came to the Cork Life Centre. The staff encouraged me to be myself, but I could not. I was running from my thoughts. It took the bones of two years for me even to begin to feel comfortable enough to say more than a few sentences. I was trying to hide how bad I felt from everyone and I felt it too risky to trust anyone. Even though getting me to talk was like getting blood from a stone, they did not give up on me or forget about me. I could not bring myself to approach them directly so I would write notes or show them pieces of my journal to read. Then they would talk to me about it. There was never any criticism or frustration. They always respected my boundaries and accepted that writing was the only way I really felt comfortable talking about some things.

What about now? I am an author. I have written pieces for publication and through the

life centre my book was published. I have just graduated from UCC with a first class honours degree in sociology and psychology. My final year sociology dissertation received the award for the best final year sociology project. Since receiving this award I am working on refining my project for publication in an academic journal. I am taking a year off in between my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. During this year I am volunteering at the life centre teaching mainly maths to the young people. None of this would have been possible if I had not attended and had the support of the Cork Life Centre. As important or impressive as any accomplishments may be, if it had not been for the ethos, persistence and support of the staff in the centre, I would not even have been alive to accomplish any of it.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. O’Leary, Caoimhe and Rhys for their opening statements. They spoke about confidence. Appearing before an Oireachtas committee takes confidence and both students should be very proud of their opening statements. I will have to leave before the end of the meeting but I am really proud of them and they should be very proud of themselves. Mr. O’Leary should be very proud of this students coming before an Oireachtas committee and giving their presentations with such style and panache. I say well done to them.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** Four minutes is not a lot of time when one is talking to Mr. O’Leary because the work they do in the Life Centre is unparalleled. Unfortunately, a lot of it goes unnoticed and it certainly goes unnoticed by various Departments. As Mr. O’Leary said, for the past 20 years the centre has received limited funding and the funding is precarious. I hope that will change following the presence of Mr. O’Leary and the students today and that the situation will be highlighted and the Department of Education will urgently look into the matter and secure funding for the foreseeable future.

I would prefer to listen to Rhys, Caoimhe and Don rather than for me to babble on. Initially, could Caoimhe specifically highlight her experience of the services provided to her in the life centre compared to what she received in mainstream education? Could she outline one specific issue that changed the situation for her?

**Ms Caoimhe Cotter:** I went from a school that had nearly 2,000 kids to one which had a maximum of 50. That was crazy to me and it made everything much easier. Mr. O’Leary and Ms Lucey really helped me get out of my anxiety and depression. They pushed me towards doing big things like coming here. I did opening speeches for Michael D. Higgins a few years back. They really pushed me and made me come out of my shell like that.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** I direct the same question to Mr. Wooten. Will he outline one specific difference between the two settings?

**Mr. Rhys Wooten:** There are many differences but probably the biggest one is time. The life centre gives one time to be comfortable there. They do not expect one to be automatically able to talk to one’s teacher as if one has known them for 20 years. Like I said, I did not talk to them much beyond “Hello. How are you?” for two years but they kept trying. In mainstream, they did not try. Once I was talked to about my attendance and that was to be given out to rather than to be talked to. My attendance improved a hell of a lot in the life centre. It was Mr. O’Leary and Ms Lucey. They linked me up with a counsellor as well who was there when I needed her.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** Will Mr. O’Leary give the committee an outline of the services the Cork Life Centre provides? It is far beyond education. Will he give us a quick summary?

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** We are working with 55 youngsters this year and have 70 staff. The majority of the staff are volunteers. We provide 15 subjects at leaving certificate and 14 at junior certificate. We have horticulture, public speaking, film and drama. We have a counselling team within the centre which provides counselling and therapy for students. We do an outreach programme where we accompany young people. We have kids in care, in the juvenile justice system and in the mental health system. We reach out and go where they need us to go. We do not force ourselves on that. They ask and we have that outreach. Counselling is available to all students within the centre.

We provide meals there and the importance of that is not only in the food, but in the socialisation process. Listening to the students today, having seven H1’s is brilliant but if a student has seven H1’s and is going into their bedroom, we have failed. I would rather that someone passes the leaving certificate and is capable of going out and taking his or her rightful place in the world. That is what is important for us.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** I agree. I wish to highlight again the lack of funding the centre gets. Is the centre entitled to apply for the summer work scheme?

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** No.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** The emergency work scheme?

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** No.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** IT grants?

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** No.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** Most recently, the centre had issues with the Covid grant. Some funding was secured but-----

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** Some funding was secured after we went public on that. That is all important but our students are not entitled to the transport grant. Our young people are not entitled to transport to school and we have young people coming from rural areas. Either we try to make the payments if the parents cannot or the parents come up with the money. It is a child’s rights issue. They should be entitled to that. They are in education.

**Chairman:** Next will be Deputy Ó Laoghaire followed by Deputy Colm Burke, who is standing in for Deputy Alan Farrell.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I thank Mr. O’Leary, Mr. Wooten and Ms Cotter. Anyone in Cork who has engagement with the education sector knows how important the Cork Life Centre is and the extraordinary work it has done over the past two decades. A great tribute is due to Mr. O’Leary, his staff and all who have supported them and the students.

The submission is very detailed but it seems to me that the ask of us is clear. The centre needs sustainable funding. The route seems to be that we need the Minister to designate the life centre as a centre for alternative education. The message to take away today is clear: we need to pursue the Department and do everything we can as a committee, as individuals and collectively to deliver that. That is something we should all commit to.

I will ask Mr O’Leary a question or two and he can answer them together at the end. Is it fair to say that our perception of second chance or alternative education is narrow and clichéd

at times and that there is a much wider spectrum of people who need services and centres such as the life centre than we sometimes imagine? Second, if a solution is not found in the next six months or a year, what is the situation for the life centre? Can it continue as is or is the future of the centre under threat? What are we looking at in the next year or two if the Department does not do what I believe - and I am sure Mr. O’Leary believes - needs to be done?

I thank Mr. Wooten and Ms Cotter for their testimony. They were outstanding and a credit to Mr. O’Leary, the centre, themselves, their families and their communities. It is obvious that the centre has meant something very different from their experience in mainstream school. What is the secret? Why does it work? Is it the size, the ethos or the socialisation?

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** I think the Department of Education is still looking at early school leavers. I do not like the term “early school leaver” because it is a loaded term which puts the blame on the young person and that is wrong. Young people cannot fail a system; the system has to fail them. There has been a change in how we view early school leavers. This is what appears in newspapers: a young person of 15 years of age on a street corner with a can, smoking hash and in trouble with the guards who does not want to be in school and comes from a one-parent family in a disadvantaged area. Some young people are like that in the centre but I have young people from upper-class families who do not attend DEIS schools, have mental health issues and are out of education. The reasons for being out of education have multiplied.

The Department, when it looks at alternative education, is looking at vocational as opposed to academic. That is grand and not every child has to go to university. However, if a child wants to go to university, then he or she should be entitled to do that. A child being out of education does not mean he or she is not interested in academics. It can be due to trauma, bullying or abuse. We forget that. Where does a child in that situation who is not from a disadvantaged background or in a DEIS school go to? Such children are further marginalised because they do not fit the niche to be involved in alternative education or to be seen as early school leavers. That is a big worry.

I have 55 children in the centre this year. I am full for 2021. This year, I have refused 155 kids. That is not just in Cork. If there were life centres in Dundalk, Drogheda and other areas, there would be similar numbers. We still have 10% of young people ending up as early school leavers, which is a terrible term. That is not good enough and we should be trying to protect them.

On funding, in the past couple of years we secured philanthropic funding, which will run out. That will result in serious problems in relation to keeping the service going. I get €77,500 from the Department of Education to work with 55 kids. Each kid going to a secondary school costs €9,000. If they were going into a community training workshop, it could be as much as €15,000. If they were going to a youth encounter project, it is €17,000. We are not looking for new money. The money is already there for the kids’ education. Let it follow the child.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. O’Leary. The next speaker is Deputy Colm Burke, who is to be followed by Deputies Ó Cathasaigh, Ó Ríordáin and Gould.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Could the delegates address my question when answering other questions?

**Chairman:** No bother, but I must call on Deputy Colm Burke now. I am very conscious that Deputies need to get to the convention centre.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I understand.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the delegates very much for their presentation. Mr. O'Leary and I go back quite a long time because we got elected together on the same day in the same electoral area in 1999. Therefore, we have a long connection. Mr O'Leary was involved in a project I was involved in. It involved young people who dropped out of school. Mr. O'Leary carried out good research showing that the project was working very well. It is important to realise that many of the people in the project we were involved in - this does not apply in Mr. O'Leary's case now - were referred to our facility by the Garda. It is also important to realise that it costs more than €150,000 per annum to keep a person in Oberstown. In the project in question, less than €1,250 is being received per student. It just goes to show the inadequacy of the funding.

I thank the delegates for their presentation and for the work they and all the others in the centre are doing. Many have worked in Cork Life Centre voluntarily. I have referred a few people to Mr O'Leary. He took them on to work and they suddenly found a pathway regarding what they want to do, not just as students. They discovered their pathway from working in the centre voluntarily. That is important to recognise.

Where students drop out of an educational facility and enter Mr. O'Leary's facility, Cork Life Centre, I understand that the school continues to draw the capitation grant. Has that changed since I was last speaking to Mr. O'Leary?

**Mr. Don O'Leary:** We are now registering children with Tusla because that is the way we register them. Before, they were not being registered because there was no one to register them. I suspect, however, that the money has been paid for the year in respect of the returns. The capitation would have been paid for the year.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** To the other school, even though Cork Life Centre would be looking after the student?

**Mr. Don O'Leary:** Yes, because it is paid in October.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Mr. O'Leary said this morning that his centre now has 55 students for this year. In total, how many students have come through Cork Life Sector in the past 20 years?

**Mr. Don O'Leary:** It is coming up to 500. When we started, there were six students. We only took junior certificate students. It was only in 2008 that we brought leaving certificate students on board. The young people wanted that.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** From his knowledge of the people who have come through the centre, is Mr. O'Leary satisfied that the vast majority are doing reasonably well outside the educational setting?

**Mr. Don O'Leary:** Yes. The number of young people who come back to us is amazing. Some of them are in apprenticeships and some are away. They are all doing really well. That is part of the advocacy we do. When we took on the leaving certificate, we had to do so on the understanding that dropping out from third level happens in first year. Therefore, we have someone who touches base with our former students when they are in first year at third level to make sure they are doing okay and to get them over the hump.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Mr. O’Leary stated his organisation is getting €77,500 from the Department. What is the total cost?

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** I do not have the exact figure to hand but it is running at about €334,000.

*Senator Aisling Dolan took the Chair.*

**Deputy Colm Burke:** So the balance has to be raised in some way by the centre itself.

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** In some way.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** In addition, there are the voluntary people.

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** Yes.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Is my time up?

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** I apologise but it is. Is the Deputy finished?

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I am.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Is it okay with Senator Mullen if we let the Deputies go first?

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Yes.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** I call Deputy Ó Cathasaigh, who has four minutes.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** The presentation very much reminds me of Sir Ken Robinson’s comment that our school system really started based on a 19th century factory model. That is in no way an insult to our schoolteachers and others in the mainstream system, who do superb work with many children and others. It must be acknowledged by this committee that one size does not fit all, however.

It is not long since I spoke for the first time in the Oireachtas. I remember how nervous I was. I compliment the delegates. In making their opening statements, they have been an absolute credit to themselves, their schools and families. Very well done.

All of us here probably have a very good understanding of what a normal secondary school day looks like in terms of timetabling and all the rest of it. Could Ms Cotter and Mr. Wooten help me to understand what a normal day in Cork Life Centre looks like? When they walk in the door, what can they expect in their day?

**Ms Caoimhe Cotter:** Right now, because of Covid, we go in and get our temperature taken. We get our timetable and our packs with our books and all the stationery we need. We then go to our classes. The classes last half an hour each. After class, we go to lunch. Each room has four to five people for lunch so we get to stay with our friends or we can go outside with whoever we want to go outside with. Then we come back for class after half an hour for another three classes, and then we go to get our phones and go home.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** All masked up, as usual, like everybody else in the country. Does Mr. Wooten wish to add anything to that?

**Mr. Rhys Wooten:** As a former student or as a member of staff?

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** As both. The information would be very helpful.

**Mr. Rhys Wooten:** I was a student before Covid. I believe the classes were 40 minutes long. At the time, we had to sign in to adhere to fire safety regulations. We handed in our phones, went to whatever room we wanted and rested until our classes. Now, because of the regulations, students have to go to the room they are timetabled to be in. When staff go in, they get their temperature taken and sign in. They also have to fill in a Covid form. I cannot remember what it is called but it basically requires staff to confirm they have no symptoms before going to class. After every class, desks, books and everything else have to be sanitised. At the end of the day, the entire classroom is sanitised. The morning students are in from 9.30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and I believe the afternoon students are in from either 1.30 p.m. or 2.30 p.m. to 4 p.m.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I thank Ms Cotter and Mr. Wooten. I want Mr. O’Leary to have an opportunity to tell us about his centre’s educational outcomes. When I am talking about educational outcomes, I am not talking about the number of H1s. I am seeking Mr. O’Leary’s perspective based on the incredible work his centre is doing. How do his students fare?

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** The one thing students have in common when they come to us is that they are children. Second, their self-esteem is at rock bottom. Some of the young people who come to us may be two years out of education, perhaps through ill health. They may be in care or may be in detention. It is the building of that. I will outline what we do that is different from what is done in a secondary school. I am not knocking the formal education system because teachers do a great job but we are able to give each student an individual education plan. If a child wants to do a subject, we have the subject. There is no science block in the centre but if a student wants to do science, we borrow a science block so he or she can take the subject. This is what it is about. If a child is doing something he or she likes, he or she is going to buy into it. The subject choice is open to the student. It can be all academic. We have some students in this category. Many do both academic and hands-on subjects.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Mr. O’Leary might forward more information to the Deputy on that query. I am conscious of the time so I apologise. I am trying to keep the timeframe tight. I ask Deputy Ó Ríordáin to contribute next.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** I thank the delegates for their presentations. I am sure I speak for everybody on the committee when I say that the political day can be quite long. In my own case, I will be here until 11 p.m. or midnight. This presentation will be the highlight of my day. I mean that sincerely. We are now looking at the education system in a different way because of Covid. It has exposed many things that do not work. One of a few things that gets me extremely wound up is the annual league tables. Having taught in school myself, as many people here have, it is no reflection of what success is. Success for some students is being in school every day. Success in some cases is being able to interact with somebody, to speak and to raise one’s chin when addressing somebody else, to listen and be respected, and to show that respect to somebody else. That is why I am critical of it.

In this committee, we might have the opportunity to form a new education system. If Ms Cotter was given the opportunity to start again, with all the money and opportunity in the world, what would she do with it? Mr. O’Leary is thinking about it and it might be a lot to throw at him. Is there an international comparison to the school that he has in Europe or the OECD or another comparable education system, into which the Cork Life Centre would fit neatly? The joke about the Irish education system is how many people in the Department of Education it takes to change a lightbulb, and they will answer by asking “Change?” As in, it does not

change things, it has received things this way and they will always be thus. How has this system worked in other jurisdictions? How would Ms Cotter like to see things change if she had a blank sheet?

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** We operate under an international model called the Servol Model. It came from the Caribbean, South America and central America. It is in the process of being recognised by UNESCO. We are in tune with that. There is no definition of it in further education. Last year, two of our students were away in Denmark for a month, in an alternative education setting. One job that they took on while there was to sit with their peers and come up with a definition. This is our 20th anniversary. Research is being done and launched, and there is a definition from children of what alternative education is. Internationally, there are life centres in Trinidad and Tobago and across South America, but not in Europe.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Would Ms Cotter like to speak on that?

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** It is a big question.

**Ms Caoimhe Cotter:** It is a good question.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Ms Cotter could come back to the Deputy at a later stage.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I thank the witnesses for being here. I live on Cathedral Road, which is around the corner from the Cork Life Centre on Blarney Street, and I know it well. I know the unbelievable work that goes on there and people who went there. Their families have told me how it has changed both the student’s life and the parents’ life. They were under pressure as children and when they were in mainstream education they could not settle in; they did not feel included or that they were part of the education system. The Cork Life Centre offers to have somebody listen to every child and take their qualities and interests into account. It is fabulous work.

It is a shame that the State, Government and Department of Education have failed the centre. We hope that by having the witnesses here today and we, as legislators, listening to the stories, we can finally put a funding stream in place. Mr. O’Leary and others are begging and borrowing to educate children. That should not be the case. Credit is due to the volunteers and people who have supported the centre for keeping it going for 20 years. Deputies Ó Laoghaire, Conway-Walsh and I and all the Deputies and Senators here, would support it. A frustrating thing for me is that every politician who speaks about the Cork Life Centre says that it is brilliant and the work it does is unbelievable, yet we cannot get it any money. I am a new Deputy and I hope, with others, to change that. How does it feel for Mr. O’Leary when politicians pay lip service to the work that the centre does then let it down afterwards? Ms Cotter and Mr. Wooten spoke about other young people, like them, and, as Mr. O’Leary said, 150 people did not get in this year. If they were among those children who did not get in this year, how bad would they have felt?

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** I am normally really positive. The centre has kept going. It took us 20 years to get to this point and I am grateful that we are here and are meeting the Minister, but we need support at this stage. For me, this is a children’s rights issue. Every child has a right to education. Parents might not like this but my children are entitled to the same rights as those attending formal education.

**Ms Caoimhe Cotter:** One could not guarantee that I would still be here today without the

Cork Life Centre. I cannot imagine what it would be like for kids who could not get in. It would be awful. I felt guilt when I started attending and taking up a place. Even though I was getting along in mainstream school and surviving, I was running myself into the ground. Had I not got a place there, I would not be alive today, and I do not say that lightly. I felt extremely guilty because in my mind, I was depriving someone who needed the centre of his or her place.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I am sorry if that was very personal. It is important that people understand the difference that the Cork Life Centre makes for young people. That was brave of Ms Cotter and I thank her.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** I thank Ms Cotter and Mr. Wooten. We appreciate their feedback. We need more supports as well as what is in the mainstream system.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** I add my words of welcome and wish to say how grateful I feel, along with other members, for what the witnesses have come to tell us today. Something impressive and beautiful is going on in the Cork Life Centre. It is a customised response to educational need which cannot be met in what is called the mainstream system. I thank the witnesses for what they have said. We want to help in any way that we can. We do not hold all the levers of power but we do our best. I was reading about it and the vision of Edmund Rice is something that I have great respect for. I was reading about the centre's approach, the philosophy of ignorance, attentive listening and respectful intervention, which all point to the same thing, that one has to listen to people, see where they are and what they need to try to respond to it. The approach is clearly customised to what Mr. O'Leary has been saying. The Edmund Rice Schools Trust does great work in mainstream schooling. Has there every been any connection or support between it and the Cork Life Centre? Is it thought to be beneficial to the trust's vision of education for the centre to do its particular skilled work? In describing alternative education, is the secret sauce the one-to-one aspect of it? Would Mr. O'Leary highlight more things where the life centre gets in to reach places that others cannot reach, to use the phrase from the ad?

**Mr. Don O'Leary:** Our trustees are the Christian Brothers. The building we use was a monastery and prior to that was the house of the first lord mayor of Cork. The Christian Brothers gave it to us and they are our trustees. We are not directly connected with the Edmund Rice Trust because that covers the schools element and we are not a school.

I believe alternative education takes a more holistic approach. For me, the academic and the socialisation aspects are equally important. Fitting the individual needs of the young people is a priority for us. We certainly need smaller numbers, but it is a priority for us to keep the kids going. It is bigger than just one-to-one.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** I thank the three witnesses for coming in. I spoke to Mr. O'Leary on the phone some weeks ago and I have since spoken to many people along the west coast about his work. I was struck by what he said about surviving in mainstream school, but life is so much more than survival. It is about thriving and being able to engage with the community. That is what education is about. He very eloquently outlined the benefits he is getting there. It is not just about academic involvement, but about many different things.

When the system of education in this country is compared with other systems of education, I accept we have different patron bodies in secondary school, but it is really all the same and there is nothing else outside that. I have spoken about my experience in alternative education. We really need to throw our support behind the work Cork Life Centre is doing. It is about that specific school and we do not want to dilute that in any way today. I thank Deputy Pádraig

O’Sullivan for bringing it to the table.

I can see how long Cork Life Centre has struggled to get to this point and we do not want things falling at this point. The centre has my party’s support and it is clear that it has considerable support around the room. Deputy Gould asked some pertinent questions that highlight what the place means for Mr. O’Leary. I believe he has said it all. Because I have spoken at length to Mr. O’Leary, I know he is looking for a sustainable funding stream to avoid having to live from hand to mouth every year. The work Cork Life Centre does is amazing. It is about what people go on and do in society. It has that radial effect that impacts us all with the kinds of lives that people lead. I do not want to apply pressure because we are all doing our best.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Mr. O’Leary might like to come back to the Senator after the session. I thank her for her comments.

**Senator Eileen Flynn:** Having listened to the past and current students, I recognise that Cork Life Centre offers a lifeline for young people in Cork who do not belong or do not fit into the educational system. Other Deputies and Senators have asked the questions I had. For me it is simple, and I am anything but naïve. Cork Life Centre needs to be recognised and valued for the work it does. I am just a Senator; I have no power. The members of this committee have the power to write a letter as a collective to the Department of Education to ask that this life centre be recognised as an equal part in our educational system.

Based on my experience coming through the educational system, I know that not one shoe fits all. I always say that I was as thick as a plank when it came to the academic side of it, but on the social side of it, I was extremely intelligent. That is the education system - no fault to it. I came through secondary school and the educational system worked for me. However, we need to acknowledge it does not work for many young people. It would be very positive for the Department of Education to recognise Cork Life Centre and to fund it; to break down all the barriers.

Speaking to the students outside the door they told me that they get no student passes and no grants for going to the education centre. The life centre works with children from ethnic minority groups as well as children from working class areas - Traveller children, refugee children and children with disabilities including learning disabilities. If we could take one positive action before this horrible year ends, I suggest that the committee could write a letter to the Department and end 2020 on a positive note. Cork Life Centre creates a lifeline for young people and it should be valued. I thank the witnesses for presenting to us today.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** We need to look at other measures as well as academic excellence. We need to look at our primary and post-primary sectors in that regard.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** I thank Rhys, Caoimhe and Don for the presentation, which was very informative. Based on my involvement with Youthreach, I am aware that mainstream education does not suit everyone. There is space for the life centre, which has a huge role to play. Awareness of available options is a big issue. If people do not know it is there, they will not necessarily consider it. How did the witnesses become aware of it as an option? Were they given referrals? How did they choose it?

I agree with Senator Flynn that the committee should write to the Minister to establish how she proposes to recognise Cork Life Centre and put it on a sustainable footing.

It would be worthwhile for the committee to examine the scale and nature of early school

leaving and the gaps in policy on that.

**Mr. Rhys Wooten:** There was a television show a few years ago called “The Secret Millionaire” and the life centre featured in one of the episodes. I do not remember the specifics of it, but I know that was how my mother became aware that it even existed. Fortunately, it was there for my brother who is younger than me, but he went there first. Through that we saw the good it did for him. My mother saw how poorly I was doing. She contacted Mr. O’Leary and he called me in for an interview.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** It happened perchance as a result of seeing it on television.

**Mr. Rhys Wooten:** Yes.

**Ms Caoimhe Cotter:** I was lucky. Three of my older brothers were already in the centre. One of them was there before I was born and two of them were still in there at the time. I have known Don since I was a baby. I was practically already there before I was even attending the school. It was fairly easy to find.

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** The referral pathways into the centre are normally through educational welfare officers, CAMHS and social workers, and sometimes through the Probation Service. I would prefer if it was not through the Probation Service, although I have nothing against it. However, I want children to attend the centre because they want to be there and not because they have been told they have to be there. All of the State agencies in Cork can get to my door and do so regularly. Schools would also be part of this.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** I thank the witnesses. I will raise the points they made with the Chairman, Deputy Kehoe, for whom I am deputising. I very much support the idea of the committee sending a letter to the Department of Education seeking a response on this issue. We heard earlier from a witness on the issue of early school-leavers.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** Will the letter be sent to the Minister?

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Yes. I am very impressed that Ms Cotter and Mr. Wooten have come in here to speak. It is difficult to speak publicly. An earlier witness spoke about the importance of having more education outside the mainstream to encourage students and pupils to develop other aspects as well as the mainstream academic focus. That is probably lacking in many of our mainstream schools. Our DEIS schools are there to support people with special needs. We are seeing more of these at primary school level. At secondary level, we probably need more also. There seems to have been a great need in Cork and Mr. O’Leary stepped up in a setting where there is significant disadvantage. The area I come from, Ballinasloe in east Galway, also has significant social deprivation. If Ms Cotter and Mr. Wooten were looking back to the mainstream schools, what additional supports would be of benefit to them? Would creative arts, music, drama and public speaking programmes also be of support to students in the mainstream?

**Mr. Don O’Leary:** I am firmly of the belief that one size does not fit all. When we are talking about formal education, classrooms of 30 students are too big. A teacher is judged on how a student does in an examination. That is how the system works. That can leave a teacher with five children who are acting out and five who are acting in. They are the ones who tend to disappear. Smaller classrooms and more flexibility around the curriculum would help. We provide career guidance but we should have counsellors who deal with mental health issues because that is a very significant problem. Schools should have counselling available. We have to listen to

children. My presence today does not matter but hearing the testimony of young people and how education impacts on them is the strongest voice we can hear and we should listen to it.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** I thank Mr. O’Leary. Would Ms Cotter like to contribute on that point?

**Ms Caoimhe Cotter:** In my old school, everything was set in stone. We had to be prim and perfect and have our hair tied back in a particular way. It was super weird for me, as I was never like that. That was just crazy. When I came into the Cork Life Centre it was super relaxed, especially that we did not have to have our hair tied back. That was really weird to me. I am fairly sure the counsellor at the school was a CSPE teacher. We had to pay for our lunch every day. I went to a school in a disadvantaged area where no one had the money to pay for lunches twice every single day. They did not have free lunches. We had to spend thousands of euro on books, which was awful because I left after three weeks. It was very strange when I came to the centre that it was so chilled and relaxed. It was awesome. I wish more mainstream schools were like that.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** There was more space for the individual and the students themselves. Would Mr. Wooten like to come in there?

**Mr. Rhys Wooten:** I struggled a lot to adapt to the centre because I am a highly anxious person and like routine. There was no fixed timetable so we needed to check after every class.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** This is about structure and routine and there was more spontaneity there.

**Mr. Rhys Wooten:** Another thing was that I am conditioned to use “Sir” and “Miss” and this is not done in the centre. I have still trouble calling Don by his name and not “Sir”. In mainstream school, students cannot enter a classroom unless they are invited in so they have to stand in a hallway getting crushed up against a wall. That is not the case in the centre where children are told to go into a classroom, it does not matter where, and to find their space. Granted, my space was in a corner on the floor.

This was not so much of an academic issue but a social one in my school report because I was fine academically but needed to do much work on a social level. In mainstream schools the emphasis is only on the academic.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** We need more ways, then, to develop students to become more confident and gain self-esteem. In that way, Mr. Wooten developed to his maximum potential.

**Mr. Rhys Wooten:** Yes, together with emotional intelligence.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Yes, it is always good to have a look at that.

By way of an update, members can agree that the Chairman will send a letter to the Minister requesting that the centre be looked at and reviewed in terms of second level education as an urgent priority. I will also ask the Chairman to circulate the letter to members.

I thank everyone for their contributions, which were very impressive. I wish we had more time and I apologise for rushing. Members are welcome to engage with the Cork Life Centre and I ask that Mr. O’Leary provide responses to the questions that have been asked.

## JEFHERIS

I thank everyone for attending. I am sure this has been a moment of great pride for Mr. O'Leary, Mr. Wooten and Ms Cotter, who have been very impressive. The discussion has been very beneficial and informative for the committee and I thank our witnesses for sharing their experiences with us. As these are very personal issues, it is often very hard to speak about them and we can become very emotional doing so. The witnesses' contributions were excellent. The Cork Life Centre has had a profound impact and I wish it every success in the future. I commend the staff at the centre and Mr. O'Leary on his commitment and pioneering work. This is very much in evidence in the calibre of the students here today. They should all be proud of their achievements. I look forward to engaging with them again through the committee when we will, I hope, have a little more time.

This committee will meet again at 11.30 a.m. on Thursday, 14 January to discuss the 2021 work programme, the 2020 annual report, and the draft report on the impact of Covid-19 on primary and secondary education. I wish everyone a lovely break for Christmas and a very happy and safe new year.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.38 p.m. until 11.30 a.m. on Thursday, 14 January 2021.