

Focussed Policy Assessment Early Start Programme

Early Years Education Policy Unit



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Contents

- 1. Introduction** **1**

- 2. Efficiency of the Early Start programme** **1**
 - 2.1 What is the total cost of Early Start and how has this changed over the past 6 years? 1
 - 2.2 How has the unit cost per child enrolled in Early Start changed over the past 6 years? 3
 - 2.3 How does the unit cost of Early Start compare to the cost of other pre-school provision? 5
 - 2.4 What is the average attendance rate in Early Start and how does this compare to equivalent settings? 6
 - 2.5 What is the average completion rate for children attending Early Start? 7

- 3. Effectiveness** **8**
 - 3.1 To what extent is Early Start appropriately targeted? 8
 - 3.2 To what extent is Early Start delivering positive educational outcomes for children? 11
 - 3.3 To what extent are Early Start teachers and childcare workers equipped with the key skills and knowledge to support positive educational outcomes for children? 14
 - 3.4 To what extent are parents engaged in their children’s education through Early Start? 16

- 4. Conclusion** **17**

- 5. Recommendations** **18**

- 6. Next Steps** **19**

- Bibliography** **19**

1. Introduction

This is a focussed policy assessment of the Early Start pre-school programme. The Early Start Programme was established in 1994 in 40 primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage. The schools are located in Cork (6 schools), Dublin (26), Galway (1), Louth (2), Limerick (3), Waterford (1) and Wicklow (1).

The programme is a one-year early intervention scheme to meet the needs of children of pre-school age who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. The project involves an educational programme to enhance overall development, promote positive educational outcomes and offset the effects of social disadvantage.

This policy assessment focusses on the efficiency and effectiveness of the Early Start programme. The analysis is structured around a set of key questions. The analysis of these questions in turn leads to a series of findings. These findings are then addressed through nine recommendations.

The analysis in this assessment is informed by relevant research literature, policy documents, and by the results of a survey of school principals who have responsibility for Early Start units. The principals' survey was conducted in 2013 specifically for this policy review. 37 out of the total cohort of 40 principals responded to the survey.

2. Efficiency of the Early Start programme

An assessment of efficiency involves an examination of the relationship between the inputs and outputs associated with a particular programme. The inputs associated with Early Start are the costs of the programme. The outputs are the number of pupils enrolled in the programme. This policy assessment seeks to measure the relationship between these inputs and outputs through the following five key questions:

1. What is the total cost of Early Start and how has this changed over the past 6 years?
2. How has the unit cost per child enrolled in Early Start changed over the past 6 years?
3. How does the unit cost of Early Start compare to the cost of other pre-school provision?
4. What is the average attendance rate in Early Start and how does this compare to similar settings?
5. What is the average completion rate for children attending Early Start?

These key questions are analysed in turn below.

2.1 What is the total cost of Early Start and how has this changed over the past 6 years?

In the 2013/14 school year there were 40 Early Start units which had capacity to cater for 1,650 children in total. The 40 units were broken down into 15 'full' units and 25 'half' units. Each 'full' unit consists of two qualified teachers and two childcare workers. A full unit can cater for 60 children through two separate morning sessions from 9.00am-11.30am and two afternoon sessions from 12.00pm-2.30pm. A teacher and childcare worker work with a maximum of 15 children in each session. A 'half' unit consists of one qualified teacher and one childcare worker and has the capacity to cater for a total of 30 children, with 15 in a morning session and another 15 in the afternoon session.

Expenditure on the Early Start programme comprises the salary costs of the teachers and childcare workers that are employed in each unit, as well as the following grants:

- €2,539.48 per full unit or €1,523.69 per half unit per annum for the purchase of materials/equipment.
- €1,904.60 per full unit or €952.30 per half unit per annum for the development of parental involvement.
- €95.23 per pupil annual capitation grant to the schools' Board of Management, to be used as funding support for day to day running costs of the centre.

The total cost of Early Start in 2013/14 was €5.6 million (see Table 1 below). This represents a reduction of €745,000 (or 11.7%) since 2008/09. The reduction is mainly attributable to a reduction in salary costs. Such costs have decreased by €712,086 (11.7%) in the last six years due to the public sector wage cuts that have been imposed during that period. Salary costs are the main cost driver on Early Start, accounting for 96% of the total cost of the programme in 2013/14. Any change in salary costs inevitably has a significant impact on the overall cost of the programme.

A reduction in the level of grants paid to Early Start units also contributed, but less significantly, to the decrease in the overall cost of the programme. Expenditure on grants decreased by almost €33,000 (11.7%) since 2008/09. This is due to a reduction in the number of pupils enrolled (see section 2.2 below) as well as one full unit changing to a half unit in 2010/2011. The table below details expenditure and enrolments on the programme since 2008/2009.

Table 1: Expenditure on Early Start, enrolments and unit cost

Year	Grants	Salaries	Total cost	No. of teachers	No. of childcare workers	Pupils	Unit cost
2008/09	€280,216	€6,062,086	€6,342,302	56	56	1,572	€4,035
2009/10	€276,693	€5,992,043	€6,268,736	56	56	1,535	€4,084
2010/11	€266,059	€6,057,719	€6,323,778	55*	55	1,444	€4,379
2011/12	€260,155	€5,671,433	€5,931,588	55	55	1,383	€4,289
2012/13	€257,774	€5,350,000	€5,607,774	55	55	1,357	€4,132
2013/14	€247,299	€5,350,000	€5,597,299	55	55	1,251	€4,474

* From 2010/11 there are 15 full and 25 half units. Prior to that there were 16 full and 24 half units

Key finding 1: The overall cost of the Early Start programme has declined by approximately 12% over the past six years. This is mainly due to a reduction in salary costs.

2.2 How has the unit cost per child enrolled in Early Start changed over the past 6 years?

As illustrated in Table 1, the unit cost per child enrolled in Early Start in 2013/14 was €4,474. This represents an increase of €439 per child (or 11%) since 2008/09. This increase arises at a time when the overall cost of the programme has declined.

The main reason for the unit cost increase is a decline in enrolments. Enrolments on the programme peaked at 1,619 children in 2000/01. Enrolments fell by 368 children to a total of 1,251 in 2013/14, which represents a decline of 23%. This is at a time when the demographic trend for this age cohort evinced strong growth: there was an increase of 18% in the 0-4 age cohort at national level between 2006 and 2011.¹

The decline in Early Start enrolments is also evident in the enrolment patterns of individual Early Start units. In the 2009/2010 school year, 50% of the half-units and 42% of the full units did not have full enrolment. For the 2013/14 year, these percentages have increased to 88% and 87%, respectively. Similar to other Department of Education and Skills programmes (e.g., the School Transport scheme), the Early Start scheme includes a minimum threshold for continuation of services. In the case of Early Start, a unit will be closed if it has less than 70% enrolment for more than a three year period. However, the existence of this threshold is not included in the Guidelines for the programme and may not therefore be widely known by the principals of Early Start units. In addition, the threshold has not been enforced consistently despite the fact that some units have dropped below the minimum threshold for more than three years.

The under-enrolment impacts on the efficiency with which resources allocated to Early Start are used. Teacher and childcare worker salaries represent fixed costs irrespective of the number of pupils enrolled. In 2013/14 there were 399 unfilled places (representing 25% of the total number of places available). If the full complement of 1,650 places had been filled in 2013/2014 the unit cost per child would have been €3,415². This means that the unit cost would be 24% lower (even though the overall cost of the programme would increase by €37,996 due to capitation payments required for the additional 399 pupils).³

An alternative means of reducing the unit cost of Early Start would be to increase the number of pupils that can be catered for in each session. While under-enrolment is an issue at present, the question of optimal class size is worth considering in any future plans for Early Start. An increase in the number of children in each Early Start class would result in a small increase in the overall cost of the programme due to extra capitation payments. However, as salary costs represent 96% of the cost of the programme and are fixed costs irrespective of enrolment numbers, the increase in enrolments would improve the efficiency with which resources are used.

The views of principals in schools with Early Start units were sought via questionnaire as to the reasons for the decline in enrolments. The main issue identified by almost all respondents was the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme (the ECCE scheme or 'Free Pre-school Year') in 2010. Under the ECCE scheme, which is administered by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, each child between the ages of 3 years and 2 months and 4 years and 7 months is entitled to free pre-school

¹ There were a total of 356,329 in the 0-4 age cohort in 2011 census compared to 302,252 in 2006. http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/census2011profile2/Profile2_Older_and_Younger_Entire_Document.pdf

² Calculated as €5,597,299 + capitation grant for extra 399 pupils (€37,996 = €5,635,296/1650)

³ Under-enrolment was also identified as an issue in a previous evaluation of Early Start that was published by the Educational Research Centre in 2002. See *Further Evaluation of Early Start Progress Report*, M Lewis and P Archer, Educational Research Centre, January 2002.

education. In contrast to the Early Start sessions, which are 2.5 hours in duration, the ECCE scheme offers provision of 3 hours a day. Principals claimed that the longer duration of the ECCE session made it more attractive to parents⁴ than Early Start. The duration of Early Start sessions was identified as a potential factor in declining enrolments as far back as 2002, well before the introduction of the ECCE scheme (Archer and Lewis, 2002).

Other factors that were identified by school principals as contributing to the decline in enrolments were less significant in terms of the frequency with which they were mentioned. Prominent among these 'other' factors were the revised age criteria for Early Start enrolments, and the unpopularity of afternoon sessions.

The age criteria for enrolment in Early Start was changed in March 2012. Since that time, children have to be aged more than 3 years 2 months and less than 4 years 7 months on the 1st day of September of the year in which they are enrolled. Previously, children had to be aged between 3 and 4 years. The decision to revise the age range was taken for two reasons. In the first instance there is a growing body of national and international research which indicates that children who start primary school at a later age have a higher level of school readiness than their younger peers (see section 3.2 below for more on this issue). Raising the threshold for participation in Early Start also brought the programme in line with the ECCE scheme.

The unpopularity of the Early Start afternoon sessions is borne out in the enrolment data. As indicated previously, each Early Start class can cater for up to 30 children in two sessions – 15 children in the morning and 15 children in the afternoon. In the 2012/2013 year, 74% of all morning sessions operated at greater than 90% capacity (i.e., at least 14 children enrolled) compared to only 44% of afternoon sessions.

Principals were also asked to identify the main factors that encourage parents to enrol their children in Early Start. The factor most frequently identified was direct experience of the programme either by the parents themselves, or by their other children. Other factors mentioned were the convenient location of Early Start units within school grounds (which means only one drop-off point and pick-up point for all children in a family), and the reputation and quality of the programme. The factors are summarised below.

Table 2: Factors identified by principals as encouraging enrolment into Early Start

Factors that Encourage Enrolment	No. of mentions
Parent/guardian experience of Early Start	22
Location within school	17
Early Start's good reputation	16
Quality of Early Start programme	15
Parental involvement – open door policy	15
Ease of transition to primary school (including preference for enrolment if junior infants is over-subscribed)	12
Free of charge	11
Qualifications of staff	9

⁴ Any reference to 'parents' in this assessment should be interpreted as including parents and guardians.

One factor that has the potential to impact on enrolment is the extent to which the benefits of Early Start are disseminated and understood within local communities. Principals were asked to identify the measures they use to target children for Early Start. The most common method is through a direct approach from a parent, some of whom may already have another child enrolled in the school, rather than as a result of the initiative of the Early Start unit. The other main method used is the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Teacher whose role is to support children and their families from disadvantaged backgrounds. The use of promotional literature, word of mouth, the public health nurse and other support agencies are used to a lesser extent.

Key finding 2: The unit cost per child enrolled in Early Start in 2013/14 was €4,474. This represents an increase of €439 per child (or 11%) since 2008/09. The increase is attributable to a decrease of 23% in enrolments since 2000/01. Under-enrolment is a particular problem in the afternoon sessions. Higher enrolments would result in greater efficiency of resource use. A number of factors may affect enrolment: competition from the ECCE scheme, changes to the age criteria for Early Start, the unpopularity of afternoon sessions, and the lack of enforcement of a minimum enrolment threshold. Strategies that could impact positively on enrolments could include wider promotion of the benefits of participation in Early Start, wider use of enrolment strategies that have shown to be successful, consideration of issues such as optimal class size and duration of Early Start sessions, and the consistent enforcement of a minimum threshold for the continued viability of an Early Start unit.

2.3 How does the unit cost of Early Start compare to the cost of other pre-school provision?

The ECCE scheme was introduced in 2010 to provide universal pre-school care and education for 3 hours per day for 38 weeks of the school year. The cost of the scheme in 2013/14 was €174m. The scheme is administered by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs through the County Childcare Committees (CCCs). Capitation grants are paid to eligible early years settings in respect of each participating child. Provision is delivered through a mix of public and private settings. The standard rate of capitation per child is currently €62.50, with a higher capitation rate of €73 (payable to services where relevant employees have higher qualification levels).⁵

Expenditure on the ECCE scheme is shown in Table 3. The table indicates that the cost per child of the ECCE scheme in 2013/14 was €2,560. While this is significantly lower (43%) than the €4,474 cost per child in Early Start in the same year, the two programmes are not directly comparable.

Children participating in Early Start are engaging with a qualified teacher as well as a childcare worker, in a class with a maximum of 15 children. In the ECCE scheme, the minimum qualification requirement for the payment of the higher capitation rate is that the 'pre-school leader' possesses a major award in early childhood care and education at Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications. For the payment of the standard capitation rate the minimum qualification requirement for the pre-school leader is currently a Level 5 major award.⁶ The ECCE scheme has a ratio of one pre-school leader for up to 11 children and similar adult-child ratios apply for classes with more than 11 children.

⁵ Prior to September 2012, the capitation rates were €64.50 and €75 respectively.

⁶ The minimum Level 5 requirement is being increased to a Level 6 Award from 2014 onwards for new services registering with the Child and Family Agency. Services already contracted with the Agency have until September 2015 to meet the requirement.

The terms and conditions of employment of primary teachers are determined by the State. Within the early years sector, the terms and conditions of employment of early years pedagogues are determined by their employer where the only requirement is for the employer to meet the minimum wage legislated for under the National Minimum Wage Act 2000.

Table 3: Expenditure on ECCE Scheme (figures supplied by DCYA)

Year	Capitation	Administration	Total cost	No. of children	Unit Cost
2010/11	€144.455m	€9.087m	€153.542m	63,000	€2,437.17
2011/12	€154.353m	€8.68m	€163.033m	66,000	€2,470.20
2012/13	€165.154m	€10.614m	€175.768m	68,000	€2,428.74
2013/14	€164.254m	€9.858m	€174.112m	68,000	€2,560.47

Key finding 3: The unit cost per child participating in the ECCE scheme in 2013/14 was 43% lower than the Early Start unit cost. However, these figures are not directly comparable as the terms and conditions of employment of pedagogues in the primary sector and in the early years sector are markedly different.

2.4 What is the average attendance rate in Early Start and how does this compare to equivalent settings?

An important aspect of the efficiency of Early Start is the extent to which children who are enrolled in the programme actually attend on a daily basis. Data from Early Start principals (summarised in Table 4 below) indicates that the average annual attendance of Early Start pupils since 2008/09 was between 79.9% and 85.4%. For comparative purposes, information was obtained for the same period on the average annual percentage attendance of infant pupils (junior and senior infants combined) in schools that have Early Start units. In those schools that provided information, the average annual percentage attendance of infant pupils ranged from 88.2% to 91.4%.

Table 4: Average attendance for Early Start and Infant pupils (2009-2013)

Year ending	Early Start Mean*	Infant classes Mean**	Difference in attendance rates (percentage points)
2009	81.3	88.8	7.5
2010	82.1	88.2	6.1
2011	79.9	89.1	9.2
2012	83.6	91.2	7.6
2013	85.4	91.4	6

* n = 36 (35 in 2013). ** n = 32 (31 in 2013)

The data indicate that, for each of the years between 2009 and 2013, attendance rates of infant pupils have been higher than those of Early Start pupils by between 6 and 9 percentage points. Some principals explained the variation in attendance rates by suggesting that childhood illnesses are more likely to affect Early Start pupils as it is the first time that many of the children are mixing socially outside of their family network.

The 2002 evaluation of Early Start by the Educational Research Centre (ERC) also examined attendance rates of Early Start and infant pupils over the period 1996 to 2000. Similar to the findings above, the ERC found that attendance rates of infant pupils was consistently reported to be higher than Early Start pupils, by 6 or 7 percentage points. However, the data collated for this policy assessment indicates that attendance rates of both cohorts have improved in the intervening period: the 2002 study found average percentage attendance rates for Early Start pupils of between 76.7% and 78.9% and for infant pupils of between 84.2% and 85.1% (ERC, 2002). This indicates that attendance at Early Start has improved in recent years, rising from 76.7% in 1996 to 85.4% in 2013. There has also been an improvement in attendance among infant pupils over the same period.

Key finding 4: The average annual attendance of Early Start pupils in the years under review was between 79.9% and 85.4%. While this is between 6 to 9 percentage points lower than the average annual percentage attendance of infant pupils, it is not unexpected given that children often experience routine childhood illnesses for the first time in pre-school. The average annual attendance rate has improved significantly over recent years for Early Start (and infants) pupils.

2.5 What is the average completion rate for children attending Early Start?

The final aspect of efficiency considered as part of this assessment is the extent to which children enrolled in Early Start actually complete the one year programme. Attendance at or completion of Early Start is not compulsory and parents are entitled to withdraw a child from the programme at any stage. However, it would impact adversely on the efficiency of resource use if this were happening on a widespread scale as fixed costs have already been incurred.

Table 5, which is based on data from school principals, indicates that the completion rate for Early Start in 2012/13 was 79.3%. This has improved by 4 percentage points since 2008/09. While there has been a decrease in enrolments over this period, a higher proportion of those children who enrol in Early Start are completing the one year programme.

Table 5: Completion rates in Early Start units (n=29)

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
No. of children enrolled	1,572	1,535	1,444	1,383	1,357
No. of children completing the 1 year programme	1,188	1,181	1,142	1,115	1,077
Completion rate (%)	75.57	76.94	79.09	80.62	79.30

Key finding 5: The completion rate for Early Start pupils has improved over the past five years, up by 4 percentage points in 2012/13 to 79.3%.

3. Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the Early Start programme is measured in this policy assessment through the following 4 key questions:

1. To what extent is Early Start appropriately targeted?
2. To what extent is Early Start delivering positive educational outcomes for children?
3. To what extent are Early Start teachers and childcare workers equipped with the key skills and knowledge to support positive educational outcomes for children?
4. To what extent are parents engaged in their children’s education through Early Start?

3.1 To what extent is Early Start appropriately targeted?

This question involves a focus on two separate but related issues. In the first instance there is the issue of whether the original areas chosen for inclusion in Early Start are still socio-economically disadvantaged. The second issue is whether, within those areas, the children enrolled in Early Start are drawn from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The extent to which the catchment areas for Early Start can be categorised as ‘disadvantaged’ was assessed using the deprivation index used by Pobal ([www.pobal.ie/ deprivation index](http://www.pobal.ie/deprivation_index)). The Pobal HP Deprivation Index is a method of measuring the relative affluence or disadvantage of a particular geographical area using data compiled from various censuses. A scoring is given to the area based on a national average of zero and ranging from approximately -35 (being the most disadvantaged) to +35 (being the most affluent). The process of matching the Early Start catchment areas with a rating on the deprivation index is not straightforward as some catchment areas include pockets of severe disadvantage that are surrounded by other areas that are much less disadvantaged.

For 31 of the Early Start units it is possible to assign a deprivation index rating. Table 6 below, which organizes the ratings by bands indicates that 29 of the 31 units are located in areas of acute deprivation, with the other 2 located in areas that are less deprived but not affluent.

Table 6: Early Start units position on deprivation index

Deprivation index	No. of schools
-35 to -26	0
-25 to -16	21
-15 to -6	7
-5 to +5	2
+6 to +15	1
+16 to +25	0
+26 to +35	0

The process of identifying deprivation index ratings for the other 9 units was more difficult due to the fact that their catchment area involved pockets of severe disadvantage combined with areas which are less deprived. A breakdown of the ratings assigned to each of these 9 units is shown in Table 7. The more mixed socio-economic profile within the catchment areas of these 9 units is evident in the fact that it is not possible to assign a single deprivation rating with any degree of confidence. For that reason a range of values is given for each unit’s catchment area.

Table 7: Early Start units position on deprivation index (where assignment of a rating is more complex)

	Deprivation Index
Unit 1	-29 to + 17
Unit 2	-23 to + 9.7
Unit 3	-13 to +4
Unit 4	-13.5 to +15
Unit 5	-13.5 to +15
Unit 6	-12 to -3
Unit 7	-13 to -1
Unit 8	-6 to +2
Unit 9	-10 to +14

Within each Early Start catchment area, the programme is intended to be targeted at children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A set of indicators of disadvantage is identified in the guidelines for the programme and these criteria are intended to be used by schools to prioritise children for enrolment⁷. This is particularly relevant to the 9 Early Start units referenced in Table 7 as the existence of a set of criteria for identifying disadvantage is intended to ensure that the scheme is targeted appropriately even within those catchment areas with a mixed socio-economic profile. The guidelines for the programme also state that pupils with either a physical or mental disability should also be given priority when places in Early Start are being allocated. However, it is made clear in the guidelines that such children must also be from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Each Early Start unit is expected to have an enrolment policy in place to set out how places will be prioritised in the event of over subscription. However, data from 37 principals of schools with Early Start units indicated that only 29 have such a policy in place. Of those policies that are in place, only 16 of the 25 respondents (not all principals responded to this question) used indicators of disadvantage as the first criteria for prioritising children. The other 9 units used another rationale for prioritising pupils. These included whether there are siblings already in the school; whether the child is included in the school's catchment area; the age of the child; or whether the child has special needs.

Data was also collated from principals about the extent to which certain categories of children are enrolled in Early Start: children from the Travelling community, children whose first language is neither English nor Gaeilge, and children with special needs. The common characteristic associated with all of these groups is that they are more likely to require extra support within the classroom. The data was compared, for the purposes of this assessment, to data collated by Pobal as part of their annual survey of the Early Years sector. The latest Pobal data available relates to 2012 and is based on responses from 3,137 of the 4,356 early years services surveyed. The Pobal survey encompasses all early years services, and is not limited to services that are located in areas of disadvantage. This is an important qualification that must be acknowledged when comparing data with the Early Start units, which are limited in number, and which are specifically targeted at those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

⁷ The indicators are: pupils whose family live in a rented local authority house or flat or in non-permanent accommodation; pupils whose family hold a medical card; pupils whose parents are in receipt of unemployment benefit or assistance; pupils whose mother did not take the Group or Intermediate Cert/Junior Cert examination at school; pupils whose father did not take the Group or Intermediate Cert/Junior Cert examination at school; and pupils living in a lone-parent household.

The data indicate that a total of 15 (or 41% of Early Start units) have at least one child from the Travelling Community attending. This compares to 13.8% of all early years services (Pobal, 2013). In total, 31 Traveller children were enrolled in Early Start in the 2012/2013 school year, which represented 2.4% of total enrolment. This is similar to the Pobal figure of 2% for all early years services (Pobal, 2013). In Early Start units with Traveller children enrolled, the numbers ranged from 1 child to 6 (10% of that particular school's Early Start enrolment).

The data also indicate that 30 Early Start units (or 81%) reported having at least one child enrolled whose first language is neither English nor Gaeilge. This is significantly higher than the corresponding average of 57.6% of all early years services who are in the same category (Pobal, 2013). A total of 185 children, or 14.5% of total enrolment, in Early Start had neither English nor Gaeilge as their first language. This is in excess of the 10.8% of all early years services (Pobal, 2013). In schools with such children enrolled, the numbers ranged from 1 child to 28 (57% of that particular school's Early Start enrolment).

While Early Start is intended to target socio-economic disadvantage, the guidelines for the scheme also indicate that pupils with special needs can be prioritised (provided that they are also socio-economically disadvantaged). Data from school principals indicated that 73% (27) of Early Start units had at least one child with a special need (as diagnosed by the HSE) enrolled in 2012/13, compared to 45% of all early years services (Pobal, 2013). Early Start units (nor pre-school services in general) do not receive any additional assistance, in terms of Special Needs Assistants, to support them in accommodating the needs of children with special needs.

A total of 98 children with special needs of varying types were enrolled in Early Start in 2012/13, which represents 7.7% of total enrolment. This is higher than the 4% of children enrolled in all early years services (Pobal, 2013). In Early Start units with children identified as having a special need, the numbers ranged from one child to one-third of children.

Data on the type of special needs most frequently encountered in Early Start is collated in the table below. The most frequent category was that of "speech and language" difficulties (34% of children with special needs). This was followed by "autistic spectrum disorders" (19% of children with special needs).

Table 8: Type of special need accommodated in Early Start, 2012/13⁸

Category of Special Need	as % of all Early Start children with special needs
Speech and language difficulties	34%
Autistic spectrum disorder (Aspergers, ADHA, Autism)	19%
Sensory disability (hearing/sight)	15%
Learning disability (e.g. dyspraxia, dyslexia, etc.)	11%
Physical disability	6%
Down Syndrome	3%
Other	10%

The total number of Early Start children in 2012/13 who were reported as having a special need, being a member of the Traveller Community or having neither English nor Gaeilge as their first language was 314. This figure may overstate the numbers involved, as individual children may be classified under more than one heading. However, with that caveat, the figure would suggest that in the region of 25% of children enrolled in Early Start are members of one of these three groups. Only one Early Start school reported that it had no children from any of these three groups enrolled in 2012/2013. In the other 36 schools, the numbers of such children enrolled ranged from 1 to 37.

⁸ Please note that these figures have been truncated and don't add up to 100%.

Key finding 6: Early Start is targeted at children who experience socio-economic disadvantage. The guidelines for the scheme contain a set of criteria to ensure that the scheme is targeted at children from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds. However, the majority of Early Start units do not use these indicators of disadvantage as the main criteria in their enrolment policies in instances of over-subscription (and some have no enrolment policies in place at all).

3.2 To what extent is Early Start delivering positive educational outcomes for children?

The Early Start programme aims to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop their abilities in a number of important areas. These include developing their early literacy and numeracy skills and developing their overall cognitive, language and motor skills.

One difficulty in assessing this aspect of effectiveness is the lack of data on the attainment of children in Early Start. A mechanism for the collection of such data would strengthen the future monitoring of performance in this area. While Early Start units are located in recognised schools and are therefore subject to the inspection regime of the Department of Education and Skills, there has been no specific inspection (until recently⁹) of the Early Start units as a specific cohort of centres of education.

In order to assess the extent to which the programme supports children's development, the ERC undertook a number of evaluations of Early Start between 1998 and 2003. As part of this process, the ERC assessed the achievements of the first two cohorts of Early Start participants when they reached junior infants (in November 1995 and November 1996) and again when they reached second class (in 1998 and 1999). The Early Start participants were compared to a control group that had not participated in the programme.

The Test used for the Junior Infants class was the Early Screening Profiles (ESP) which measures cognitive and motor development. The literacy and numeracy attainment of the second class cohort was tested using the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test and Drumcondra Primary Mathematics Test.

The results indicated that there were practically no differences between the achievement of Early Start participants and the control group in junior infants in relation to cognitive, language or motor skills. Similarly there was no statistically significant difference between the Early Start and non Early Start participants in relation to literacy and numeracy when they reached second class.

However, teachers' perceptions of Early Start participants, when those children had progressed to junior infants, were more positive than the test results. In interviews conducted with junior infants teachers in November 1995, teachers indicated that the former Early Start participants had higher levels of cognitive and social maturity, were better adapted to classroom procedures, and had higher levels of self-determination and independence.

The type of benefits that the junior infants teachers identified in former Early Start participants relate to the concept of 'school readiness'. This is a multi-dimensional concept which encompasses academic ability, as well as a range of other issues including physical health and well-being, motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development and emergent literacy. Research indicates that children who begin school with the appropriate cognitive and social skills tend to maintain this advantage (UCD Geary Institute, 2013).

⁹ The DES inspectorate conducted evaluations of a sample of Early Start units in 2013/2014 as part of a trialling of new test instruments that are intended to be employed in other early years services as part of the overall quality agenda for the early years sector. The results of these evaluations were not available at the time of writing this policy assessment.

For the purposes of this policy assessment, principals of schools with Early Start units were asked to assess the extent of school readiness of Early Start participants who had progressed to junior infants. Principals were asked to state how competent/ developed Early Start children typically are, at the start of junior infants, on each of five separate domains that are related to the concept of school readiness:

- Physical health and well-being
- Social competence
- Emotional maturity
- Language and cognitive development; and
- Communication skills and general knowledge.

Principals were asked to compare Early Start children in each of these domains to (a) children who have not attended pre-school and (b) children who attended a pre-school other than Early Start. The following rating scale was used:

- 1 = Early Start children tend to be significantly more competent/developed
- 2 = Early Start children tend to be somewhat more competent/developed
- 3 = Early Start children tend to be similarly competent/developed
- 4 = Early Start children tend to be somewhat less competent/developed
- 5 = Early Start children tend to be significantly less competent/developed

The result of the principals' assessment is tabulated below.

Table 9: Early Start children compared to children with no pre-school experience

n=35	Rating of 1 (% schools)	Rating of 2 (% schools)	Rating of 3 (% schools)	Rating of 4 or 5 (% schools)
Physical health and well-being	77	23	0	0
Social competence	89	11	0	0
Emotional maturity	93	3	3	0
Language and cognitive development	91	6	3	0
Communication skills and general knowledge	96	6	0	0

The majority of principals considered Early Start children to be "significantly more competent/developed" than children with no pre-school experience along all five domains. Early Start children were assessed particularly high on the domains of "communication skills and general knowledge" and "emotional maturity".

Principals were of the view (as summarised below) that the differences between children who attended Early Start and those who attended a pre-school other than Early Start were not as significant as the difference between those who attended Early Start and those who did not attend any pre-school. However, while the perceived impact of Early Start on children's school readiness was relatively lower than in the previous comparison, the majority of principals still considered Early Start children "significantly more competent/developed" on four domains. The exception was the "physical health and well-being" domain. Even here, however, 76% of principals still considered Early Start children to be either significantly or somewhat more competent/developed than their peers that had attended another pre-school.

Table 10: Early Start children compared to children who attended a pre-school other than Early Start

n=34	Rating of 1 (% schools)	Rating of 2 (% schools)	Rating of 3 (% schools)	Rating of 4 or 5 (% schools)
Physical health and well-being	35	41	24	0
Social competence	50	41	9	0
Emotional maturity	62	23	15	0
Language and cognitive development	65	26	9	0
Communication skills and general knowledge	59	32	9	0

The findings of this analysis are somewhat consistent with those of a small-scale unpublished study conducted by the UCD Geary Institute in 2013. The study examined the association between attendance at different forms of centre-based childcare and school readiness skills. The information was generated, in the autumn of 2012, from a survey of school readiness of junior infant children attending three primary schools in a disadvantaged community in north Dublin. In total, there were school readiness ratings for 105 children who had attended 14 childcare centres included in the analysis. 34 of the children had attended Early Start (UCD Geary Institute, 2013)

The study found that there were differences between the school readiness ratings of children who attended Early Start and those who attended other Síolta accredited settings. Síolta is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Settings that are Síolta validated have given evidence of their capacity to deliver quality service in all aspects of early education and care.

Children who attended Early Start scored significantly higher on the “social competence” and “emotional maturity” domains. In terms of “language and cognitive development”, while Early Start children were rated as having significantly greater interest in literacy, numeracy and memory, children who attended other Síolta accredited settings were rated as having significantly better basic numeracy skills.

When children who attended Early Start were compared to children who had attended non-Síolta accredited settings, the differences in the school readiness ratings were greater. Again, Early Start children scored higher on the “social competence” and “emotional maturity” domains. However, this time they were also rated significantly higher on the “physical health and well-being” and “language and cognitive development” domains.

Key finding 7: Available data indicate that Early Start children do not achieve statistically significant differences in terms of educational outcomes when compared to children who have not attended pre-school or who have attended an alternative form of pre-school. However, participation in Early Start appears to result in advantages in terms of ‘school readiness’ which is an important issue for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The strengthening of data collection from Early Start units on children’s progress would assist in future assessments of educational outcomes.

3.3 To what extent are Early Start teachers and childcare workers equipped with the key skills and knowledge to support positive educational outcomes for children?

The extent to which Early Start professionals are fully qualified in their fields, are participating in relevant continuing professional development (CPD), and are using key framework documents to inform their classroom practice, are factors that could be expected to influence the quality of the education and support provided to children enrolled in the programme.

It is a requirement that all teachers and childcare workers employed on the Early Start units are fully qualified.¹⁰ That this requirement is being met was confirmed by data returned from the Early Start units which indicated that all teachers and childcare workers meet the minimum qualification requirements.

The data also indicated that teachers working in Early Start are relatively experienced professionals. The range of teaching experience ranges from 4 to 45 years, with an average length of service of 17 years. Only 6% of Early Start teachers have been teaching for less than 5 years. 39% have been teaching for between 6 and 10 years, with a further 55% teaching for between 11 and 40 years.

The majority of these teachers are relatively new to Early Start. The average length of Early Start experience is 5 years. Almost three-quarters of the teachers (73%) have worked for 5 years or less in Early Start classrooms. 17% have worked between 6 and 10 years in Early Start, while a further 10% have been working in Early Start for between 11 and 20 years (Early Start has been in existence for 20 years).

The length of overall childcare/early years education experience of the current Early Start childcare workers ranges from 3 to 33 years, with an average of 16 years. The length of Early Start experience ranges from 1 to 18 years. In contrast to the teachers, most of the childcare workers have been employed in Early Start for more than 10 years and the average length of Early Start service is 14 years.

While the teachers and childcare workers are professionally qualified and are experienced in their respective fields (even if some of the teachers are relatively new to Early Start), the extent to which these professionals engage in ongoing professional development is also important. Participation in continuing professional development (CPD) in areas relevant to early years education will ensure that professionals are integrating the latest learning into their classroom practice.

Principals provided data on the extent to which Early Start personnel in their school have attended any of workshops or summer courses relating to Aistear (the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for the 0-6 age cohort) or Síolta.

In relation to Aistear, the data from principals indicate that 49% of teachers (n=41) and 36% of childcare workers (n=39) have attended an Aistear workshop while 26% of teachers (n=38) and 9% of childcare workers (n=33) have attended an Aistear summer course. This means that the majority of Early Start personnel had not attended either an Aistear workshop or summer course. On further analysis, it was found that in the case of 15 of the schools (47% of respondents), none of their Early Start personnel had attended either an Aistear workshop or summer course.

¹⁰ The minimum qualification for Early Start childcare workers recruited prior to 1st September 2012 is a Major Award (qualification) at Level 5 or its equivalent on the NQF in Childcare, Pre-school Childcare or Social Care or equivalent. The minimum qualification for childcare workers who are recruited with effect from the 1st September 2012 is a Major Award in Childcare/Early Education at Level 5 on the NQF or its equivalent.

Principals were also asked whether their Early Start personnel had attended any Síolta information sessions or workshops. Of 51 teachers, 12% had attended a Síolta information session or workshop while 88% had not. The corresponding percentages for 47 childcare workers was very similar: 13% had attended compared to 87% who had not. In total, only 6 Early Start teachers and 6 childcare workers had attended Síolta related professional development activities.

Apart from Aistear and Síolta related activities, principals reported that 78% of Early Start teachers and 74% of Early Start childcare workers had undertaken other professional development activities linked to early childhood education in the past 2 years. As shown in the following table, the nature of the training/activities varied considerably. In 3 schools, none of the Early Start staff had undertaken any CPD in the past 2 years.

Table 11: Type of CPD courses attended by Early Start professionals, 2011-2013

	Number of schools
Early Start summer course	10
Speech and language/language development	8
Special needs training	5
Incredible Years training	4
Infant education summer course	3
Montessori training	2
Child protection	2
Others (1 mention each)	23

Another important factor in assessing the extent to which Early Start professionals are equipped with relevant skills and knowledge is the extent to which they use key early years framework documents to inform their classroom practice. Early Start principals were asked about the extent to which three of these key resources have informed current Early Start classroom activity and approaches:

- ➔ the Early Start curricular guidelines
- ➔ Aistear (the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework), and
- ➔ Síolta (which is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education).

The responses received are summarised below.

Table 12: Extent to which key framework documents inform classroom practice

Resource	n	A great deal	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
Early Start Curricular Guidelines	36	78%	19%	3%	0%
Aistear	36	28%	50%	8%	14%
Síolta	31	6%	16%	23%	55%

The Early Start Curricular Guidelines were found to have a high degree of influence on current Early Start activities and approaches. This was particularly in relation to staff planning/preparation (39% of respondents identified this area), shaping practice in terms of learning objectives and contexts (27%), and in the use of preliminary and end-of-year profiles (24%).

Aistear was reported as being somewhat influential by most schools. It has proved particularly useful to Early Start settings in informing learning objectives and contexts (38% of respondents identified this aspect), reinforcing the importance of delivering the curriculum through play (24%), and in providing practical ideas and exemplars (21% of respondents).

In contrast, the majority of schools (78% of respondents) reported that Síolta has not yet had an influence on current Early Start practice.

There is a related issue that is beyond the scope of this assessment but that has relevance to both the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme. There is a need to consider whether teachers, even fully qualified, are the most appropriate pedagogues for the Early Start programme where some children enrolled are under the age of 4. It is an issue that warrants further consideration, particularly given the fact that early years practitioners are specifically trained to cater for the learning and developmental needs of the cohort of children participating in Early Start.

Key finding 8: Early Start professionals are fully qualified and experienced in their relevant disciplines. However, some Early Start teachers and childcare workers do not appear to have engaged in CPD that is relevant to early years education in general and that involves a specific focus on key framework documents such as Aistear and Síolta. In particular, greater opportunity for Early Start teachers and childcare workers to engage with Síolta as a key resource to inform classroom practice and activities might be beneficial. Further consideration could be given to the issue of whether qualified primary teachers or pedagogues who graduated in early childhood care and education are most appropriately qualified to meet the educational and developmental needs of children in Early Start.

3.4 To what extent are parents engaged in their children's education through Early Start?

Parental involvement in children's learning has been identified as a key factor in encouraging children's learning (DCYA, 2014). Promoting parental participation is an important objective of Early Start and a specific grant is allocated for this purpose. Despite this, the ERC found in 2002 that parental involvement was not widespread. However, the ERC noted that a wide range of strategies had been adopted to encourage parental involvement but that parents did not appear to be availing of the opportunities (Archer and Lewis, 2002).

The data collated from Early Start principals for this policy assessment suggests that the position has improved. Principals identified a variety of strategies that are being adopted to encourage parental involvement in the Early Start units. These include providing information to parents through an open day before the start of the first term, sending materials home for parents to work on with their children, observation days once a month where a parent works with the child in the classroom, sharing resources with parents, parent – teacher meetings, as well as ongoing and more informal opportunities during drop-off / pick-up each day.

Principals reported that a majority of parents (2012/2013 cohort) availed of the opportunities afforded by the programme to become involved in the school and / or its activities. As shown in Table 13, in 69% of schools, over three-quarters of parents had availed of opportunities to become involved in the school. However, in 12% of schools the proportion was less than half.

Table 13: Parental involvement in Early Start

Proportion of Early Start parents that have become involved in school	Number of schools (n=32)	% of responses
All	7	22
75-99%	15	47
50-74%	6	19
25-49%	2	6
Less than 25%	2	6

Principals identified significant benefits arising from parental involvement in Early Start. These include parents encouraging their children’s learning to a greater degree, becoming more involved in the learning process, and becoming more confident in guiding their children’s learning. All respondent principals also indicated that the closer interaction between parents and Early Start units provides schools with greater opportunities to discuss children’s progress with parents and to offer advice. The parental involvement was also considered a good means of building relationships between parents and the school community.

There is a requirement for each Early Start unit to establish an advisory group, to include representation from parents, to assist in the ongoing operation of the unit. However, only 5 principals reported that their Early Start unit had established such an advisory group (which is a reduction from the 7 schools that had advisory groups at the time of the 2002 ERC evaluation). The information that was provided by those principals where advisory groups had been established indicates a lack of consistency in terms of the membership, terms of reference and frequency of meetings of the advisory groups.

Key finding 9: Early Start units have adopted a wide range of strategies to engage parents in their children’s learning and this has proved successful in many instances. This has benefits for the parents, and the Early Start units, as well as for the children. However, very few Early Start units have established an advisory group. Where advisory groups have been established there are some inconsistencies in certain key aspects such as membership, terms of reference, and frequency of meetings.

4. Conclusion

This focussed policy assessment has identified 9 key findings in relation to the efficiency and effectiveness of the Early Start programme. These findings identify the many strengths of the programme, in terms of targeting children from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds, promoting their social, cognitive and emotional development and in encouraging their parents to engage in their children’s education and with the education system more generally.

The analysis has also identified some challenges in the current operation of Early Start. In relation to efficiency, these challenges revolve around the significant decline in enrolments over the past number of years. In terms of effectiveness, the main challenge is to provide a means of data collection on the development and key milestones achieved by Early Start participants. This would facilitate future monitoring of the educational outcomes associated with the programme. There is also a need to provide additional guidance to Early Start units in a number of areas. These include the establishment of advisory groups, the promotion of available CPD opportunities for staff, and the dissemination of information on ‘what works’ in terms of enrolment strategies. These challenges are addressed below through a set of nine recommendations which are intended to strengthen the Early Start programme in future years.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed:

1. The Department of Education and Skills should establish a central steering committee for the Early Start programme, to include representation from Early Start principals, teachers and childcare workers, as well as parents of children in Early Start units. The committee should be chaired by the Early Years Education Policy Unit. Its purpose should include strengthening links between the Department and the Early Start units, facilitating dissemination of best practice including the development of linkages with other local early years services, identifying and promoting CPD opportunities, and providing advice on all aspects of the programme.
2. The issue of declining enrolments in Early Start should be considered by the Early Years Education Policy Unit. This consideration should include issues identified in this policy assessment such as the most appropriate length of the Early Start school day, the potential for increasing pupil teacher ratios in Early Start sessions, the wider use of those enrolment strategies that have proven most successful, the appropriate age criteria for enrolment, and the relative unpopularity of afternoon session in Early Start units.
3. Each Early Start unit should target children from disadvantaged backgrounds as a first priority. The indicators of disadvantage that are used for this purpose should be made explicit in each unit's enrolment policy.
4. The existence of a minimum enrolment threshold for the continued viability of Early Start units should be explicitly included in the Guidelines for the scheme. This threshold should be consistently enforced so that any Early Start unit that does not meet the specified requirements is considered for closure, with appropriate arrangements made for redeployment of Early Start professionals. In such instances, the premises could be considered for alternate uses, or leased to a commercial pre-school.
5. Early Start teachers and childcare workers should have access to relevant opportunities for continuing professional development. A needs assessment of Early Start professionals should be undertaken to identify these needs as a means of informing future provision in this area. CPD opportunities should include a key focus on raising awareness of and engagement with Síolta. This could be done in conjunction with the Education Centre Network that is funded by the Department of Education and Skills.
6. The benefits to participants of the Early Start programme, as a flagship initiative of the Department of Education and Skills, should be profiled more clearly at local and national level.
7. Data collation should be strengthened in order to allow future measurement of the educational outcomes associated with the Early Start programme.
8. Advisory groups should be established in all Early Start units with advice provided by the Early Years Education Policy Unit in relation to terms of reference, membership, and frequency of meetings.
9. Consideration should be given to the issue of which professionals are most appropriately qualified to cater for the learning and development needs of children in Early Start.

6. Next Steps

The findings arising from of this Focused Policy Assessment of the Early Start intervention programme will be published electronically and made available to the schools participating in the programme. It is intended to hold an open forum at the beginning of the next academic year 2014/2015 to invite school principals, academics, teachers and childcare workers to discuss the findings from the assessment and to agree on the most appropriate way to implement the recommendations.

Early Years Education Policy Unit

June 2014

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