

Tackling Educational Disadvantage

*Proposals to alleviate educational disadvantage
and give every child and adult greater
opportunity and equality in education*

A Labour Party Policy Document

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Introduction

What is educational disadvantage? (page 4)

Some statistics on educational disadvantage (page 5)

Labour's objectives and Labour's proposals (page 5)

The school as an active centre of community learning (page 6)

Early childhood education for all 3-year olds (page 7)

The Right to Read and literacy levels (page 8)

Proper funding of Schools (page 9)

Class sizes and improved pupil-teacher ratios (page 10)

Classification of schools for targeted intervention (page 11)

Professional support for students at risk (page 13)

Curriculum reform and assessment issues (page 14)

Fair Access to Schools (page 15)

Life-Long Learning (page 16)

The Cost of Going to School (page 18)

Conclusion

Introduction

“At the core of the Fair Society is Education. The Fair Society is a place where every child, irrespective of income, can find knowledge to reach the limit of their potential.”

*Pat Rabbitte TD
Leader of the Labour Party*

If the Labour Party in Government is to build a Fair Society, then educational reform must be a key plank in the party's platform. Education is the route through which individuals are empowered to bridge the gap between what they are, and what is within them to become. It is a route to personal fulfillment, but also to enhancement of our community, responsible citizenship and further growth in our prosperity. Investment in education is good investment from the State's point of view. Our education system can and should become the jewel in the crown of our public services.

This document focuses on one the most pressing aspects of the reform agenda in education – the need to tackle educational disadvantage. It is an issue that has been receiving considerable attention in recent times, largely in the context of inequality in access to third level education, and the growth of fee-paying schools. But the issue of educational disadvantage is much wider, covering all levels of education. Its roots and the key to tackling it effectively lie in the early years of a child's development. Nor, as is sometimes portrayed, is educational disadvantage confined to particular urban locations or areas of acute socio-economic disadvantage, but is spread right across the country. It is an issue that Labour in Government will confront as a core element in creating a fair education system, fair to all children and adults in education.

There are several contributory factors to educational disadvantage including socio-economic background and issues of poverty and social exclusion which go beyond this scope of this document. The primary focus of this paper is education-based measures to tackle educational disadvantage as opposed to the broader societal and economic issues which contribute to the problem.

Note: This is the third in a series of policy documents on education from the Labour Party. We recently published proposals on school funding and back to school costs, which are referred to several times in this document. Both are available on www.labour.ie

What is educational disadvantage?

It is useful to begin by clarifying what is meant by the term 'educational disadvantage'.

The phrase is usually used to describe situations where children and adults, mainly from disadvantaged economic and social backgrounds, do less well at school than others. The 'Educational Disadvantage' of some is in sharp contrast to the 'Educational Advantage' of others, those who attend well-equipped schools, smaller class sizes and where social and economic success are the expected norms.

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (1997) set itself a target 'To ensure that children, men and women living in poverty are able to gain access, participate in and benefit from education of sufficient quality to allow them to move out of poverty, and to prevent others from becoming poor'. To this end, it set targets to eliminate the problem of early school leaving before Junior Certificate, to ensure that at least 90% of students would complete the Leaving Certificate by 2000 and 98% by 2007 (see table over), and to ensure that 'having regard to the assessment of their intrinsic abilities, there are no students with serious literacy and numeracy problems in early education within the next five years.'

While there is no single contributory factor, it is generally recognized that the factors which can contribute to a child underachieving at school are complex, involving a myriad of causes: family situations, parental education, economic poverty, poor housing, ethnic or cultural difference, rural isolation, poor attendance, pupil-teacher ratios, under-resourcing of certain schools and the suitability of the school/education system itself.

Essentially, educational disadvantage is multi-dimensional, rooted in the complex interaction of factors at home, in school and in the community. While it is often concentrated in almost all schools that are designated as disadvantaged, educational disadvantage can exist in any school or affect any child despite their educational circumstances.

Its essential cause is poverty: inequality in wealth, inequality in income, inequality in access to jobs, to power, to the media etc. Addressing educational disadvantage has to be part of an overall strategy to address poverty. Ireland, as one of the wealthiest economies in the world, must demonstrate the political will to do this.

The education system has failed to counteract disadvantage for thousands of school leavers each year. They face significant economic and social exclusion, with unemployment rates averaging over 50% and high job insecurity for those who do get jobs.

Some statistics on educational disadvantage

- About 800-1000 children per year do not transfer from primary to second-level school.
- 4% of students leave school before Junior Cert.
- 18.4% of students leave school before Leaving Cert.
- Up to 80% of children from Traveller families do not go on to second-level education.
- High levels of literacy problems. The most recent study, the Education Research Centre's report entitled "Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools", published in November 2004 found that 30% of primary school children in poorer areas suffer severe literacy difficulties.
- Continued low level of participation from young people from poorer backgrounds in 3rd level education (despite some recent positive evidence in this regard).
- A Department of Education report on Educational Disadvantage shows that, while the greatest percentage of disadvantage children are to be found in rural areas, the greatest concentration is in parts of our cities, particularly Dublin.

Labour's Objectives

The Labour Party is committed to addressing inequality through policies that lead to an integrated society where all citizens are given the opportunity to reach their full potential. We want to arrive at a point where the education system of the state, paid for through common taxation, serves all children according to their needs, treats their cultural background equally, does not underpin privilege or hold children back because their family lacks money and gives young people the skills and self-belief to shape their own lives.

The primary aim is, therefore, to develop an inclusive and equitable public education provision to an excellent standard from pre-school to adulthood. This requires structural changes across the education system. It also requires extra targeting of resources. These resources and strategies must be based on clear research evidencing positive outcomes. The myriad of interventions that are in the system are uncoordinated, intermittent and not rigorously tested for measurable outcomes.

Summary of Labour Party proposals

1. The school as active centre of learning for the community.
2. One year of early childhood education for all 3-year-olds.
3. The right to read
4. Proper funding of schools.
5. Reduced class size and improved pupil-teacher ratios.
6. Classification of schools for targeted intervention.
7. Professional support for students at risk.
8. Curriculum reform.
9. Fair access.
10. Lifelong learning.

1. The School as an Active Centre of Community Learning

It is widely recognized internationally that successful programmes to address disadvantage centre the school at the heart of the community. The school campus should be open all day and all evening. Proposals in the Labour Party document *'Running a Primary School – the Real Cost of Day to Day Expenses'* (October 2004) on the funding of schools address the thorny issue of insurance and how the obstacle this presents can be overcome.

The school should be a hive of activity, a place for lifelong learning, for breakfast, homework and youth clubs, for public meetings and community fora. Parents should feel comfortable there, especially if their own experience of school was negative.

This model is particularly important for schools in disadvantaged communities. Some schools have already come a long way to achieving it. However it will be necessary for the Department to be proactive in directing schools to take on this wider role through, for example, financial incentives i.e. if insurance was purchased centrally and covered other activities in the school such as night classes etc, then the financial headaches associated therewith would be reduced (see Sec. 4)

Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme

The Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme has a very valuable role in addressing educational disadvantage. Co-ordinators work in partnership with families, schools and the local community and among their functions is to intervene at an early stage with at risk families and to involve parents with the policies and activities of the school. The long-term strategy should be to have this scheme provided in all schools. In the short-term, all schools with high levels of disadvantage should have a Home/School/Community co-ordinators.

2. Early Childhood Education for all 3-year olds

Simply put, intervention is not early enough, not coordinated and its outcomes are not tracked. We propose a bottom-up approach. Third-level access programmes have no relevance to a child who has dropped too far behind by the age of 6. All of the expertise concludes that early intervention is vital to a child who needs support, whether for social or learning reasons (e.g. St. Patrick's College, Dublin and Mary Immaculate, Limerick and the Children's Research Centre, TCD).

The Highscope Preschool Model research in the USA and the UK demonstrated that every dollar invested in pre-school education achieved a rate of return to society of around seven dollars. A major European longitudinal study, which is still on-going, *'The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project'*, has found that quality pre-school provision is particularly beneficial to disadvantaged children. Quality Early Childhood Education, provided universally, will ensure that children with potential difficulties can be identified and supported very early in their development.

The Labour Party in Government will guarantee a one year pre-school place for all 3-year-olds before they begin primary school.

The recent OECD report, *'Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy'* showed that Ireland is out of step with the rest of Europe in this vital area. According to this extensive Review, only 4% of three-year-olds have received publicly funded pre-school education in Ireland, compared to over 90% in many other European countries. There is a wide variety of options for parents including community crèches and preschools, Montessori schools, preschool playgroups etc. but access to them depends on ability to pay and/or location. Our proposal would not seek to replace these local options but would ensure universal provision, coordination and standards.

The Labour Party supports the OECD Review's recommendation that more sustained and targeted intervention is required in areas of greatest disadvantage. Later in this document we will outline our proposals for the **banding of schools** (sec. 6) using data already collated by the DES. We recommend that in areas where schools have high priority, a model based on the Early Start programme, introduced by Niamh Bhreathnach as Labour Minister in the mid-1990s, should be used, with the hours available extended, as recommended by the OECD.

Children from disadvantaged families and communities are very much dependent on school to bring them equality of outcome with those who are already advantaged. They come to school with a range of factors stacked against them. They may have heard a very limited range of vocabulary, have seen few books, have little space and sometimes not enough nourishment at home. Their parents may find it hard to cope with the stresses in their lives. These children need an intensive programme that is sensitive to them and their families, that affirms their successes and develops their literary, cognitive and social and personal development.

Such a curriculum has been developed for the Early Start programme, using play as the medium of teaching and learning. It has detailed guidelines for teachers and child-care workers, clear goals and support structures. Recent evaluations are very positive. We believe such a focused model is the right one to counteract disadvantage early in the child's life. Providing a longer day would enable time to be set aside for the children to eat and rest and would make it more friendly to working parents.

More details of our proposals on pre-school education are available in our election manifesto of 2002 and we will elaborate further on our proposals on childcare in a forthcoming document on the matter soon.

3. The Right to Read and Literacy Levels

The most recent evidence that literacy is still a major issue comes in the statistic from the Educational Research Centre which reveals that 30% of children in disadvantaged schools have severe literacy difficulties. This is a shocking statistic.

The measures proposed herein will undoubtedly have a positive effect on this statistic when they are implemented. Quality Early Childhood education with early intervention for children with learning difficulties, as well as the targeted extra supports for disadvantaged schools will, no doubt, improve literacy and numeracy.

Regular measuring of progress must be carried out for all children whose reading is below average. The Minister has yet to clarify her proposals on literacy testing but children at risk need more than across the board testing once or twice in their school

life. They need the guarantee of regular measurement of progress and continued individual attention, through primary and second-level.

The guarantee of the right to read must be ensured. This involves proper funding and equipping of school libraries and public libraries and fostering an ethos of reading in children from the earliest age possible, including at pre-school.

The national shortage of speech and language therapists has to be addressed if we are to respond comprehensively to the level of need in this area also.

4. Proper Funding of Schools

The Labour Party has been arguing for some time that the general level of funding for education in Ireland, is inadequate. Fundraising and 'voluntary contributions' by parents are common place. In a recent Labour Party survey of primary schools, *'Running a Primary School – the Real Cost of Day to Day Expenses'* (October 2004) many principals reported on-going financial problems, and the problems associated with being permanently deprived of resources. It is not unusual for schools to be deprived of basic facilities. The physical condition of many school buildings is appalling.

While these problems affect the educational opportunities of children in all areas, schools situated in more prosperous communities are in a better position to fundraise, while children from less advantaged communities suffer the full effect of the funding deficit. Children from poor communities and poor families are at an immediate disadvantage if getting the essentials depends on having to collect money from the parents of the school to pay for them.

The existing funding system is based on a 'capitation' grant which is paid based on the number of students in the school. Many of the expenses faced by schools, however, are not related to the number of children in the school, but rather to the physical condition of the building, or other factors.

We want to see all schools properly resourced so that all children can receive a basic education without their parents having to put their hands in their pockets to pay for essentials such as school maintenance, insurance, class materials, PE, music, art etc.

The Labour Party has published a separate detailed document on the issue of funding of primary schools which addresses this issue comprehensively. (See *'Running a Primary School – the Real Cost of Day to Day Expenses'* (October 2004)).

One of the proposals in that document is that the issue of the cost of insurance for schools needs to be urgently examined at a national level. We have proposed that

the National Treasury Management Agency should carry out this examination and ascertain whether it would be more cost-effective for all schools to be insured centrally. An added advantage of this approach, as well as saving money, would be that the use of schools for out-of-hours community purposes could be facilitated without insurance being the enormous stumbling block that it has become. If the DES were to insure schools centrally it would be in a strong position to require school managements to make the buildings and grounds available for a myriad of purposes, including breakfast clubs, after-school activities and evening classes.

5. Class Sizes and Improved Pupil-Teacher Ratios

Recent figures obtained by the Labour Party show that of the 429,971 primary schools pupils in Ireland, over three quarters or 363,556 are in classes with 20 or more other pupils. Over 100,000 primary school children are in classes with over 30 other pupils.

The Programme for Government (2002) contained an explicit commitment:

"We will continue to reduce the pupil: teacher ratio in our schools. Over the next five years we will progressively introduce maximum class guidelines which will ensure that the average size of classes for children under 9 will be below the international best-practice guideline of 20:1" (p.23)

The recent abandonment by Government of this commitment to have all under-nines in classes of less than 20:1 is shameful. Small classes enable teachers to give greater levels of individual attention to children. The Labour Party is committed to bring Ireland up to international best practice, with initial progress concentrated on the under-nines and schools classified as priority under the banding process. The issue of class size also needs to be addressed at second-level, particularly for subjects that involve practical work in the classroom.

Research demonstrates, however, that small classes in themselves do not automatically produce better results for the children. Teachers who have been used to large numbers need to adapt their methodology to make the best use of smaller numbers and take the opportunity to initiate group work and one-to-one interaction.

On-going in-service education for teachers is important in this context in particular. Indeed in-service education for teachers in general needs to be developed especially where class sizes would be reduced so as to ensure that a teacher's style and methods could adapt to a change appropriately in the number of pupils they teach. In-service education is the Cinderella of teacher education currently and is left, very much, to teachers to arrange in their holidays rather than being a central, time-tabled feature of their working lives.

6. Classification of Schools for Intervention (Banding)

There are a myriad of schemes and interventions currently in place to tackle educational disadvantage. Some of these have undoubtedly had positive effect. We would single out, for example, the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme, the Education Welfare Scheme, Early Start and Breaking the Cycle. However, the latter two, introduced by Labour Party Education Minister, Niamh Bhreathnach in the mid-90's have not been expanded at all by subsequent ministers and the Education Welfare Board remains under-resourced to do its job.

Some of the most disadvantaged communities in the country are not included in the School Retention Programme. The list of schools designated as 'disadvantaged' has been closed for a number of years and, no matter how good a case a school has for inclusion, they are rejected.

According to Department of Education €540 million was spent in 2004 on tackling educational disadvantage. Is there evidence to show that this money has had strong positive outcomes for children?

It is unclear how effective the mix of responses has been. Prof. Aine Hyland, who chairs the Department of Education's committee on disadvantage has said: "it is difficult to assert with any degree of certainty what the outcomes of many of the targeted interventions have been."

This haphazard approach cannot continue. There is a need to coordinate the various initiatives, to set clearer aims and objectives for them and to evaluate their effectiveness more closely.

There is an on-going debate as to how to target additional resources more effectively. While on the one hand, there are major concentrations of educational disadvantage in some areas, it is also true that educational disadvantage is a problem in every corner of the country. Tackling the problem, therefore, involves a move away from focusing solely on pockets of disadvantage.

It is our understanding that considerable work has been carried out by the DES to classify schools according to the level of disadvantage among their students, using recognized indicators. We have no desire to re-invent the wheel in this regard and propose that the Department's classification be used to **band schools or categorise them according to the level of extra support they require to tackle disadvantage effectively**. This system allows for a graded level of support from the highest to the lowest priority. It is already applied effectively in other countries such as New Zealand.

The criteria to be referred to in drawing up such a banding system would be similar to those criteria used to select schools for the Breaking the Cycle Scheme, including:

- Number of pupils from a family in which the main breadwinner has been unemployed for a year or more
- Number of pupils whose family holds a medical card
- Number of pupils living in a rented local authority house or flat
- Number of pupils living in a lone parent household etc.

Such an approach is inclusive, fair and transparent and gives a school the flexibility to use its extra funding in response to local need, in conjunction with the local community.

We propose that primary schools **where disadvantage is highest** should be entitled to the following:

- 1. Early Start, extended to the afternoon, including meals / sleep time.*
- 2. 15:1 pupil/teacher ratio to age 9.*
- 3. Classroom assistant in each class.*
- 4. Improved Home/School/Community liaison.*
- 5. Healthy Eating Programme, including school meals.*
- 6. Literacy Support Programme: the right to read.*
- 7. Book fund: the right to read.*
- 8. Intensive teacher support, re-training and in-service.*
- 9. School Retention Programme.*
- 10. A non-teaching principal for schools with more than five teachers.*
- 11. More flexibility in use of capitation grant and other grants.*

The level of support would be reduced in accordance with need for other schools. Appropriate elements of this support would pass, in a seamless way, to second-level schools catering for these children.

There is a need for greater emphasis on linkages between the different levels of education, as children frequently drop out at these transitions, especially from primary to secondary. Education Welfare Officers have a special role here. The School Retention Programme provides a good framework for linking through from primary to secondary to third-level and is community-based but it needs to be more widely spread. Some of the most disadvantaged areas in our cities are not included in the School Retention Programme at present.

The support we propose in order to retain and support good teachers in disadvantaged areas is NOT extra pay. We propose instead to offer classroom assistance, strong personal support and in-service training, guaranteed time off for on-going educational and personal development, community and parental engagement and responsibility in a whole-school context.

7. Professional Support for Students at Risk

There are not enough NEPS (National Educational Psychological Service) psychologists, not enough speech therapists, not enough interaction and support from health and social services for schools to respond in a timely and holistic way to the needs they detect in children. Parents and schools that cannot afford to pay have to do without or look to local Partnerships or the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. These deficits must be addressed.

There must also be a carry-through of support mechanisms for vulnerable children from primary to secondary school. There is little to be achieved in providing a child with specific educational needs with the professional support he or she needs at primary level if that support is not maintained into second level.

Therefore the existing interventions which provide support at primary level must lead on to initiatives at second level which will maintain the type of assistance a child needs to bridge the gap between primary and secondary school.

Children with Special Educational Needs

Legislation recently enacted, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) promises an assessment of needs and an educational plan for children with learning disabilities. As it stands, the DES only takes responsibility for these assessments when the child goes to primary school. As part of our proposals for Early Childhood Education, detection of learning needs is most likely to occur earlier and supports can be put in place at this vital early stage and can then be provided in the primary school in readiness for the child when he or she starts school. This early provision of support is proven to be of enormous benefit to children with special needs.

Proposals to move to a weighted model of support in schools, as put forward by former-Minister Dempsey, are not child-centred and do not make proper provision for the level of concentration of need in areas of disadvantage or in smaller rural schools. A study of Dublin Inner City primary schools, carried out in 2003 (A Plan for Dublin Inner City Primary Schools, Dublin Inner City Partnership), showed that 18% of the children had special needs and 24% needed learning support. The weighted model, if introduced, will fail hundreds of disadvantaged children.

It is incomprehensible that the Government, having enacted legislation that provides for a child-centred approach, should have embarked on introducing a quota model in schools. Labour supports the provisions in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act in terms of assessment of needs and those provisions should be implemented.

8. Curriculum Reform and Assessment Issues

Many young people find the second-level curriculum irrelevant to their lives. The dominance of the points system and its permeation into every aspect of school life excludes many young people.

A major reform is required if all children's needs are to be served. Children from the lower socio-economic groups have particular difficulties. Essentially, the existing system challenges their existing identity, and their commitment to, and place within their own community. For children from lower income families, there is often a gap between school, on the one hand, and their home and community on the other.

Many children, across the social classes, have particular skills and interests that are not valued in school curricula and examinations.

The challenges are in three areas:

1. The need to ensure that there is equality for the cultural experiences of all children within the curriculum and in the examination system.
2. The need to widen the curriculum to include and equally valuable subjects like music, art, sport, practical trades, culinary arts, sociology, politics etc.
3. The need to change the way intelligences and competence are tested.

In addition, there is a need for the curriculum and the assessment process to cater for a wider range of intelligences and skills, rather than the traditional and somewhat narrow academic model.

The system should allow for greater community and parental involvement, so as to reduce the perceived distance between the child's background on the one hand, and the formal education system on the other. This requires greater involvement of parents in extra-curricular activities, as well as Special Needs Assistants and Classroom Assistants. The positive value of every child's background has to be valued.

The school system has not adapted to the multi-cultural nature of modern Irish society. Particular supports are needed for schools with large number of pupils from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Such support would have to

include the promotion of multi-cultural tolerance in the classroom and assistance for teachers dealing with language barriers. These issues would be considered in the drawing up of the banding system.

In order to improve retention rates, it will be important to take from the positive aspects of the Leaving Cert Applied, so as to encourage, test and reward a wider range of intelligences and skills. These include co-operative work, interpersonal skills, and the practical appliance of learning. There is also scope to widen the assessment system beyond end-of-school exams, though it is essential that we do not diminish the transparent, anonymous and meritocratic features of the existing exam system.

Many young people drop out of school before Leaving Certificate. A more flexible model would undoubtedly keep some of them attached to the Education System. We should be able to offer a modular system at second-level for such students, allowing them to study part-time and work part-time (or raise their children, in the case of lone parents). For example, children at risk of dropping out of school, such as pregnant teenagers, should be able to opt to complete the Leaving Cert over three or four, rather than two, years.

A number of alternatives to mainstream school exist around the country (such as Youth Encounter Projects) and some of them are very successful in working with children who are estranged from formal schooling. The DES should carry out an evaluation of these projects and offer the best options on a wider basis. (See National Crime Council, *'Tackling the Underlying Causes of Crime'*, October 2002).

9. Fair Access to Schools

There is evidence of increasingly discriminating selectivity at second level. Children are being chosen by some schools on the basis of class and previous educational achievement. This is evident in the public system as well as in private schools. It was highlighted in the recent school places controversy in Limerick but is equally practiced in other parts of the country. It distorts the efforts at inclusivity and social mixing of other schools and must be contested and controlled for the common good.

The abolition of entrance exams at second-level by Niamh Bhreathnach was intended to end this kind of selectivity but some schools have since developed their own ways of picking and choosing pupils.

The DES should design an inclusive enrolment policy and guidelines for an integrated whole school culture under the Education Act (1998), in accordance with the Education Welfare Act and the Equal Status Act. All schools should be obliged to respond to a range of backgrounds and needs and respect cultural diversity.

Regulations under the Education Act, 1998 to govern admission to schools are urgently needed. The purpose of these regulations, in the words of the current Minister, is "to promote greater consistency, transparency and accountability in decision-making at school level and to further the objective, under the Education Act, of equality and participation in education". Regulations are required to ensure that schools are genuinely inclusive. They must be monitored at regional level.

Regional Education Offices

The Department of Education has regional offices in place around the country. They offer the possibility of devolution of decision-making and coordination. They should be required to be proactive in working with schools and Education Welfare Officers to manage the transfer from primary to secondary level. They also should be given the mandate of establishing co-coordinating committees to link schools with communities in their operating areas and participate with Local Childcare Committees to integrate care and education for pre-school children.

For many children in rural Ireland, physical access to school is a real problem and is a disadvantage to their educational potential. The fact that a child attends a small rural school should not be permitted to deprive him or her of whatever educational support is needed. Schools in remote areas should not suffer because professionals such as speech and language therapists do not live nearby to provide their services.

10. Life-long Learning

Education beyond school is not just about going straight to the university sector. It may involve apprenticeship, FAS, Cert, PLC's, IT's, night classes, or a combination of these. Frequently, that path will not be taken straight after school and may be broken by periods of paid employment, child-rearing, unemployment etc. These educational programmes, however, are not always valued and supported properly. The under-development and under-valuing of adult education and second chance education reinforces educational disadvantage experienced in the traditional school system.

Life-long learning must become a reality, not a slogan. Irish society must foster a new culture of adult learning, which promotes learning at all ages and stages of life, and which gives practical support to the courage and tenacity of those who seek to return to education. In this respect, cutbacks in the Back to Education Allowance and in funding for childcare at VTOS courses is extremely regrettable.

The Adult Literacy Service does an excellent job but its funding is uncertain and limits its ability to reach out to all adults who have not received this most basic life skill first time around. This service needs secure funding.

Life-long learning is particularly relevant to adults who have been disadvantaged previously by our education system and the concept of life long learning allows such people to have another chance in accessing educational opportunities at various levels and in flexible modes. Flexible models of education are crucial to ensuring that those who have been failed by the more traditional model genuinely have further opportunities and chances in our educational system.

As recommended in the White Paper on Life Long Learning and the OECD Report on Third Level Education, part-time Further and Higher Education should be treated in the same way in respect of fees, student grants and student supports, as full-time Further and Higher Education. A major barrier to adults studying part-time courses at third level at present is the high level of tuition fees; for example, a course that involves a €750 College Registration Fee for a full-time student will cost approximately €2,000 for a part-timer.

Further and Higher Education institutions should be encouraged to make their academic programmes available in a wide variety of participation modes including traditional full-time courses, in-college part-time courses, distance education modes including web-based, on line, TV and video conferencing.

All higher and further education courses should be structured in a modular credit-based form, facilitating accumulation of credits towards final awards and certification of individual modes.

Institutions should be funded for the teaching costs of courses on the basis of a financial allocation per credit, irrespective of the mode of delivery of the course. Such a funding mechanism would encourage institutions to provide their courses in delivery modes that facilitate and encourage access by students from non-traditional backgrounds, including mature students and those who have dropped out from the conventional education system.

The cap on PLC places has to be removed and the McIver report, which recommends a proper structure for PLC's must be implemented. Community education must be sustained and funded. Childcare must not be an obstacle to furthering a parent's education. The recent cuts in VTOS childcare funding were a direct attack on people who suffered education disadvantage and were trying to avail of a second-chance opportunity.

Part-time students should have the same opportunities to apply for grants as full-time undergraduate students and the Labour Party re-affirms its commitment that grants would be set at basic Social Welfare rates.

Higher Education Institutions operate Access Programmes to which support the inclusion of students who might not otherwise go to and stay at third-level. Much

good work is done through these programmes but they need to be integrated with the 'bottom up' measures proposed in this document in the seamless way proposed. The recommendations of the Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level must be implemented without further delay.

Workplace up-skilling is a crucial element in reaching the aims in the Lisbon Agenda and in giving those who left school and went straight to work with limited qualifications, if any, the chance to go up the employment/pay ladder. A basic education fund as proposed by NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency) and Aontas is required to fund a workplace programme.

The Cost of Going to School

The Labour Party has also published a document recommending improvements to the supports available to parents sending their children to school. Thousands of families on low incomes struggle on a daily basis to meet the cost of sending their children to school and the cost of the return to school in September is particularly high. The cost of books, shoes and uniforms, as well as class materials is an enormous strain on low-income families. For detailed information on our proposals see *'Back to School – The Financial Burden on Families'* (August 2004).

Conclusion

Educational disadvantage is one of the very negative hallmarks of the modern Irish education system. Too many children are falling through the cracks.

Education is widely acknowledged as one of the best routes out of poverty and one of the best routes into employment. But measures to combat disadvantage are not being targeted where they are needed most.

In this document, the Labour Party has sought to address the main elements of educational disadvantage. In conjunction with related recent policy proposals on back to school costs and capitation funding for schools and further proposals on poverty and social exclusion, this document comprises a package of measures which will be central to Labour Party policy in Government.