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The NEWB



The National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) was established in 2002 and has a statutory function to ensure that every child either attends a school or otherwise receives an education or participates in training. One of our key roles is to act as an advocate or support for a child, parent or guardian if there is a difficulty with school attendance or educational welfare.

The Board also has responsibility for children who are being educated outside of schools, for example at home, and 16 – 17 year olds who leave school to take up employment.

Ethos

The Board was set up under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. The Act is a progressive piece of legislation which takes an enlightened approach to the promotion of school attendance. The ethos of the Board follows the Act. Instead of simply admonishing children and parents for non-attendance, the NEWB endeavours to get to the root of problems behind non-attendance.

The NEWB will strive to maintain a relational and respectful ethos in order to increase the life chances of every child and young person in this State, to reduce school absenteeism and rates of early school leaving and to deliver on Government policy to same.

Mission

The mission of the NEWB is to maximise the level of educational participation of children and young people by ensuring that each child is attending school or otherwise participating in an appropriate education.

Values

The following values inform the NEWB – they are integral to our Strategic Plan for 2005 – 2007 (Every Day Counts) and are fundamental guiding principles for our work. They imbue the way the NEWB goes about its work as an organisation, with its partners in education and in carrying out its remit:

- Putting the best interests of children and young people first
- Advancing educational equality for all children
- Supporting and enabling our staff
- Operating to high standards of corporate governance
- Working inclusively and collaboratively.

Chairperson's Statement

The publication of our Annual Report for 2005 is a welcome opportunity as it allows the Board and staff to give visibility to the many achievements of the past year and it also provides a necessary forum to clearly state some of our concerns.

One of the clear achievements of our work in the past two years has been the collection and analysis of school attendance data. This is the first time in the history of this State that such data is available and we thank all those who have made their returns as required under the legislation. Research and analysis of data provides the necessary foundation from which to make an accurate assessment of the nature of the problem of school absenteeism and early school leaving. We are no longer hypothesising about the extent of this problem in Ireland, we now have accurate data and such knowledge lends an added imperative to our commitment to fully implement the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. As yet we do not have a Primary School Database in this State so our data, which is collected across the whole school sector, is an invaluable resource that allows us to analyse trends and demonstrate need rooted in evidence-based research.

The data which has been collected in 2005, verifies the Board's initial (2001) estimation; to fully meet our requirements under the Act we need a staff of 363 people. This estimation was made following a year of careful work carried out by the Board (in consultation with experts) and was informed by international best practice. Our initial estimation was that school absenteeism (of over 20 days) would fall in the region of 10%. In fact, our data now reveals that the proportion of students absent 20 days or more is as high as 18.9% at Post-Primary level (Weir, 2004). Similar to other European countries, there is an increase in poor attendance during the teenage years; furthermore, those from lower social class backgrounds are more likely to miss school. Despite these attendance levels,

we are currently operating with a staff of 94 nationally, 61 of whom are Educational Welfare Officers and 12 of whom are Senior Educational Welfare Officers.

Lack of school attendance, which contributes to school failure and early school leaving, is, as our data attests, blighting yet another set of young lives. There is now ample research to verify that early school drop-out in this knowledge-based economy frequently leads to a life of low income, if not unemployment, and these problems in turn will lead to social exclusion and, in some cases, anti-social behaviour. The loss of potential that our statistics represent places a moral imperative on members of our Board (listed in **Appendix 1**) to give voice to our concern and make ever effort possible to have the work of the Board fully resourced. The failure to commit necessary resources now will cost this State dearly in the future.

Given this background the achievements of our Board and staff during this period are all the more laudable. Above all I wish to honour the commitment of all staff who have remained faithful to the legislation in the delivery of a service that always holds a *welfare* focus in responding to all cases of non-attendance at school. Indeed, I have often heard our officers praised, especially in areas of poverty where parents can experience a sense of aloneness in trying to coax their child back to school. The presence of another adult in the community who is independent of school and simply focused on the welfare of the young person can be a real consolation to those who live under-resourced lives. A recent piece of research (MORI, 2005 – see page 20) demonstrates the amount of stress and genuine anxiety parents often feel about their child's failure to attend school: these adults can see in their own lives the consequence of lost educational opportunity.

Since the commencement of our work we have fostered a commitment to operate collaboratively with all other



persons, services and agencies who, in any given local area, are engaged in similar work. Given our role and remit under the legislation, we have taken the lead and have developed protocols to ensure that each individual child or young person receives an integrated service that positively assists them to achieve their educational potential. Integrated service delivery requires clear leadership and I am grateful that our staff has taken the initiative in this area as required under the legislation.

The publication of our Strategic Plan during 2005 has given us a clear agenda for the next three years. Such a Plan is a living instrument to inform our work and evaluate our progress. The realisation of the intention of the Plan is dependent on the ongoing dedication and commitment of the Board and staff. Over the years, as Chairperson of this Board, I have been inspired and encouraged by the integrity and generosity of my fellow Board members. The creativity and shared strategic capacity of this Board has allowed the maximum output from very restricted resources. Our work during this period has clearly increased

awareness around the importance of realising a child's right to education and to full school attendance

Our staff of 94 deserve much praise, led by our CEO, Eddie Ward, they continue to work tirelessly and have succeeded in providing a service of the highest professional standard.

Entering 2006 we commemorate 1916 and recall that noble aspiration in the Proclamation of 'cherishing all the children of the nation equally'. Investment in all aspects of educational provision is investment in a social value that will, without doubt, create equality of opportunity for the children and youth of this State today. We hope that 2006 will be remembered in future times as the year that the NEWB was fully resourced to realise its statutory responsibility.

Ann-Louise Gilligan
Chairperson

Chief Executive Officer's Review

The vision that inspired the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 is central to the work of the National Educational Welfare Board – if every child receives an education, he or she will be empowered to participate in our society on an equal basis to his or her peers, and be in a position to avail of the many opportunities that are currently available to young people. Regular school attendance is a fundamental stepping stone towards securing educational qualifications and this in turn influences a young person's ability to access further education or training and to enter the labour market successfully.

The NEWB is the single national statutory agency with responsibility for implementing the legislation (Education (Welfare) Act, 2000) and for ensuring that every child receives an education, or training where appropriate.

In 2005, the first independent evidence emerged to show that the new legislation does, in fact, work. School attendance improved by 4% in the areas where Educational Welfare Officers are based. This is enormously encouraging, not alone for the Board and its staff, but also for our parent Department (Education & Science), teachers and schools and, of course, the families of the 20,000 children with whom we have intervened successfully since January 2004.

The Board currently has 94 staff, 83 of whom are involved in service delivery. During the year, EWOs were appointed to eight new locations, bringing the total number of locations to 26 nationally. The number of children being referred to the service by schools continues to grow, but our limited ability to respond means that many children with difficulties are not being reached. The task in prioritising referrals is great and heavy caseloads are a strain. We know that the resource needs of the Board are being considered and we are hopeful that the service will grow in line with the Government's commitment to address educational disadvantage.

Following an extensive consultation both internally and externally, the Board published its first Strategic Plan covering the period 2005 – 2007, titled 'Every Day Counts'. In it, the Board enunciates its core values that will inform our work into the future. Central to these is the imperative to put the needs of children and young people at the centre of our policy-making and service delivery.

Each year, 84,000 children under 16 years of age miss 20 days or more from school and close to 30,000 may be missing up to 40 days. The scale of the numbers alone indicates that non-attendance extends beyond the poorest areas, which is consistent with findings on the incidence of early school leaving. The reasons are many and complex, and we are working on strategies to address these. Raising awareness of the value of education and the importance of regular school attendance is one of our Strategic Goals.

Increasingly through our research programme and in particular, through the experiences of our staff working in communities throughout Ireland, it is evident that non-attendance at school is an important early indicator of need in the life of a child or young person. Such needs are generally multi-dimensional and all the empirical evidence suggests that they are best addressed early on in a child's life. We are working with the Department of Education & Science, schools and other services to develop an infrastructure that will help identify children 'at risk', so that appropriate and timely intervention can be made.

Central to our commitment to service delivery is our relationship with external organisations and the development of collaborative working practices. The work of our Educational Welfare Officers builds on the work of schools and the various support services that operate at both school and community levels. Developing inter-agency working structures for collaboration with



these partners is therefore a key Strategic Goal for the Board. During 2005 work commenced on the development of protocols for effective partnerships with agencies at national, regional and community level who are involved in promoting social and educational inclusion in local communities.

Under the law, schools have huge responsibilities in relation to attendance and the quality of the education experience for children and families. The Board must support schools in this work. The Board is deeply appreciative of the way that schools have taken on their responsibilities. The work of the School Implementation Group, which consists of school managers, principals and teachers together with parents, has proved to be a tremendous resource for the Board in advising on issues at school level and in helping to resolve difficulties in implementing the legislation. During the year, comprehensive guidelines were sent to all schools on the reporting of student absences and expulsions. Work on guidelines on Codes of Behaviour and Attendance Strategies also got underway.

Every child is entitled to receive an education and it is up to parents and guardians to ensure that their child attends a school or otherwise receives an education. As an action of last resort, the Board has the legal right to vindicate a child's right to education. In 2005, the NEWB issued its first School Attendance Notices, the very first step in taking legal action against parents who have failed over time to co-operate with Educational Welfare Officers. Our primary job is to work with parents and guardians to help ensure that they

have the supports to get their children to school. That is what we will continue to concentrate on and legal action will only represent a small part of our work.

Educating children outside of recognised schools, for example at home, is a right under the law. The NEWB is working with parents to provide assessments that vindicate their children's right to education and give assurance to the families involved.

Though much progress was made in 2005, the need to strengthen the roots of our young organisation is ever-present, while we continue to develop a national service and deliver supports to families and schools. Our ability to meet these objectives depends on the level of resources allocated by Government and we will apply these resources to best advantage to deliver quality services in co-operation with others.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to our staff whose dedication to the ethos of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 underlies our success to date. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Department and its officials and all the external organisations that the NEWB partnered with in 2005 and I look forward to developing our working relationship in 2006 and beyond.



Eddie Ward
Chief Executive Officer

Operations Review



STRATEGIC FOCUS

In 2005 the National Educational Welfare Board published a clear strategic plan to guide its development. The Board's Strategic Plan 2005 – 2007, 'Every Day Counts', aims to build a strong organisation that can deliver on its duty to children, schools and families.

The Strategic Plan outlines the broad and diverse set of responsibilities that the NEWB holds under the Act. While we are the agency that holds legal responsibility for the Act, the NEWB is committed to working co-operatively with all parents of school-going children, and with our partners in education, to ensure the full implementation of the Act.

The NEWB has a very broad mandate – to promote and protect the entitlement of every child and young person to an education, and to maximise school attendance. Through the implementation of our Strategic Goals we expect to deepen and clarify our understanding of effective integrated service delivery and increase our shared understanding of the challenges that lie ahead. The Strategic Goals adopted by the Board are as follows:

- To implement a prevention strategy that will build a culture of attendance and participation among all children and families, thereby reducing absenteeism.
- To make a strong data-based case to Government to fast-track the manpower requirements of the Board, build its capacity and enable it to deliver high quality educational welfare services.
- To build strong partnerships and collaborative working practices with state and community organisations, and increase the synergy with other educational investments, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

- To ensure that resources and interventions maximise outcomes for children by implementing a research strategy and developing evidence-based policy and practice.
- To be a learning organisation that will support and develop its staff.

Our mission and value statements will inform the choices that will be required to realise these goals. At a practical level, annual business plans and other organisational documents will also be drawn up to facilitate this task.

EDUCATIONAL WELFARE SERVICE

1 National Service

A central priority for the Board has been the establishment and building of the National Educational Welfare Service. The NEWB operates through five regional teams each of which is headed by a Regional Manager and supported by a number of Senior Educational Welfare Officers (SEWOs). A service is now provided from 26 locations nationwide. In 2005, the service was extended to eight new locations: Bray, Athlone, Tuam, Castlebar, Longford, Tullamore, Portlaoise and Cavan. (We have been in 18 sites since our inception in 2004; the cities of Dublin, Cork, Galway, Waterford, Limerick, Kilkenny and the following towns; Letterkenny, Sligo, Galway, Ennis, Tralee, Waterford, Carlow, Bray, Drogheda, Dundalk, Athlone and Navan.)

The National Educational Welfare Service is



supported by the NEWB's Corporate Services division, which is the engine of the entire organisation (see page 17). The demanding work of the EWO is also supported by local and regional administrative staff who carry out core functions to facilitate the EWOs in their work.

Educational Welfare Officers

The NEWB's network of Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) is the key means by which the Board delivers on its statutory remit to ensure that each child benefits from an education.

At present 73 Educational Welfare Officers (61 EWOs and 12 Senior EWOs) work in communities throughout the country acting as advocates or supports to parents, guardians and children experiencing difficulty with school attendance or educational welfare.

In the initial stage of development, priority was given to the most disadvantaged areas (with RAPID 1 designation) with significant school-going populations. EWOs provide an intensive service in these areas. Outside of these areas, a lesser service is provided and priority is given to children who are out of school or who have significant non-attendance.

In following up on individual children, a check is made on the work done by schools and their staff. EWOs will usually contact the principal or other designated person about each child before making contact with the home. A unique feature of the EWO's work is their ability to develop a meaningful relationship with a young person and their family. Home visits play an essential role in this process and the first knock on the door by an Educational Welfare Officer very often opens up a pathway of solutions for a child and family in need. Once any underlying problems are identified the EWO can then seek to address the family's unique set of circumstances, if necessary in conjunction with school staff and other local support services.

2 Reporting Absenteeism

Schools are obliged by law to report on school attendance since the inception of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. This obligation exists to protect children's educational welfare. Poor school attendance needs to be responded to early; otherwise, as research has shown, it can lead to early school leaving (over 1,000 children do not transfer from Primary to Post-Primary school each year), poorer exam results and poorer life chances for children.

Guidance for schools

In 2005, all schools received guidance on the legislation and the reporting of student absences and expulsions. The guidelines provided step-by-step advice on how and when school attendance returns should be made.

Schools submitted a return on those students with serious attendance issues that have been identified during the current academic year, i.e. students falling within the following criteria:

- A student has been absent from school for a cumulative total of 20 days or more.
- A student's name is to be removed from the school register for any reason.
- A student has been suspended for a cumulative total of six or more days.
- A principal is concerned about a student's attendance.
- The school has expelled a student.

There were five student absence reports and one annual attendance report due in the academic year 2004/2005.

www.schoolreturn.ie

The online reporting system www.schoolreturn.ie has been designed to ensure reporting on absenteeism is a simple procedure for schools. The website was developed in consultation with school managers, principals, teachers and parents.



www.schoolreturn.ie was developed to make reporting of students with attendance difficulties easier for schools. The website also has a number of other features which schools may find useful for managing student absenteeism.

The website is supported by a dedicated 'Lo-Call' Helpline on 1890 36 36 66 and the operation of the website is being kept under review by the Board.

The website is confidential and is accessed only using a school identity code. It is protected under the Data Protection Act (1988 – 2003) and the Education (Welfare) Act 2000.

Information roadshow

During 2005, presentations on how to make returns electronically were made nationally with the support of teacher unions. Information stands were also placed at teacher conferences to promote the service and provide address any queries key audiences may have.

In addition, 21 information meetings took place across the county on the NEWB's Educational Welfare Service and reporting arrangements for Primary and Post-Primary principals and deputy principals.

3 School Attendance Data

Since the inception of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, schools are obliged by law to submit a report to the NEWB on levels of school attendance.

2004/2005 is the second year for which this data has been collected and professionally validated. Key findings (see **Appendix 2**) of the Analysis of School Attendance Data at Primary and Post-Primary Level 2004/2005 include:

- Ten percent of all Primary school students (approximately 47,000 students) miss more than 20 days from school each year (or 11% of the school year).
- Nineteen percent of all Post-Primary school students (approximately 37,000 students under

16) miss more than 20 days from school each year (or 12% of the school year).

- Every Primary school student misses on average 10 days in the school year. However, in the most disadvantaged urban areas, the average absence is 17 days per student.
- Every Post-Primary student on average misses 14 days in the school year; in the most disadvantaged areas, the average absence is 21 days for each student.
- While attendance is lower in areas of disadvantage, it is a national issue affecting all communities.

In November 2005, an overview of the findings was presented to the NEWB's Research Committee and to the Department of Education & Science. The findings were also included in the NEWB's Pre-Budget submission (2006) which has been published and is available on www.newb.ie/policy.shtml.

4 School Attendance Strategies

Preliminary work has also commenced on guidelines for schools on developing attendance strategies and the prevention of student absenteeism. The first step in developing School Attendance Strategies was to commission the ESRI to conduct research on behalf of the Board on the causes of poor school attendance. This research commenced in 2005 and will inform the development of School Attendance Strategies (see page 19).



5 School Implementation Group

The School Implementation Group – which includes parents, school managers and teachers, provides advice to the NEWB both on general priorities and on any materials and guidelines to be specifically distributed to schools. The Group's role is to help ensure that those materials are usable, practical and appropriate to already busy school schedules (**Appendix 3** lists the members of this group).

6 Codes of Behaviour

In December of 2005, the NEWB commenced a three phase process which will result in the development of the first national Guidelines for School Codes of Behaviour.

These Guidelines will focus on how schools can deal progressively with behavioural issues, thereby helping to support participation in education for all.

The Board appointed an expert group to draw up draft guidelines which will form the basis for a widespread consultation process with schools, parents, education partners, organisations working with children, and critically children themselves. The feedback from this consultation phase, commencing in the 2006/2007 school year, will inform the final Guidelines.

The development of Guidelines for School Codes of Behaviour is provided for in Section 23 (2) of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. The Guidelines will apply to all schools covered by the Act.

The NEWB Guidelines will take account of the work of the Department of Education & Science's Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level. However, its guidelines will focus primarily on supporting the process for the development of policy that promotes positive behaviour by students.

7 Task Force on Student Behaviour

In early 2005, the NEWB made a submission to the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level and warned that the Irish education system did not make adequate provisions for children who had discipline problems, and particularly for children who were expelled from school. The Board stated that any strategy used to address problem behaviour should include a welfare focus.

In its submission the Board also stated that it did not favour any weakening of the legal access to appeals under Section 29 of the Education Act 1998. The appeals system, which allows parents and children to appeal a decision to expel a child from school, had been positive for both schools and students. It had led to the strengthening of school policies and enabled schools to ensure fair and transparent procedures. For parents and students, given the seriousness of expulsion, the right to appeal was essential within the education system.

However, the Board pointed out that the issue of expulsion raised a fundamental anomaly within Irish education; how does the system make provision to meet the educational entitlements of the child who is expelled and how are the parents to discharge their legal obligations to ensure their child attends school?

As long as the right to expel a child remains in place, it must be matched by legal and educational provision for an expelled child to have access to education as the submission outlined. The NEWB regards this as a matter requiring urgent attention in terms of both legal entitlement and educational provision.

The Board advised that school disciplinary responses such as detention, standing outside classrooms, suspensions or expulsions presented a major challenge in terms of schools attendance. Any strategy used by a teacher or a school to address problem behaviour must be guided by a welfare focus. In other words, the educational welfare of the child who is removed from the learning environment should be of equal concern to a school as the child who is in the classroom.



The Board also drew attention to the difficulties which children often had in transferring from Primary to secondary school because of the different approaches to curriculum between the two school levels.

The Board pointed out that new developments in the Primary curriculum placed a premium on self-directed learning, self-expression, questioning and movement in the classroom. In some second-level environments, however, these learning behaviours could be regarded as 'problem' behaviour. Children making the transition may be confused and upset by this change in culture. The Board advised that coherence between the Primary and Post-Primary curriculum was essential.

Finally, the Board highlighted the unique role of Educational Welfare Officers in dealing with, and developing options for children with persistent behavioural problems and recommended that the role of EWOs should be strengthened within the education system.

8 Education Outside of Recognised Schools

The NEWB has a statutory obligation to ensure that all children aged 6 to 16 receive a minimum education. To do so, it must also monitor standards of education where children are enrolled in private fee-paying Primary schools, Montessori schools or are receiving home-based education.

The first step taken in 2005 towards monitoring home education was to establish a register of children and then to carry out assessments of the education received, in conjunction with the Home Education Network (HEN).

The first assessments of children being educated in places other than in recognised schools (e.g. the home) have been carried out by authorised persons specifically trained for such work. The Board works closely with HEN and the Association of Independent Junior Schools (AIJS) in implementing the new arrangements. Almost 200 children are now

registered, apart from those children attending private Primary schools.

9 Early Employment

Preparatory work is continuing in relation to the establishment of a register for 16 and 17 year olds who leave school to enter employment.

10 Protocols

In 2005, intense work commenced with schools to develop a protocol that will clarify respective responsibilities and expectations about school attendance.

In 2005, work also commenced on the development of protocols with support services such as the National Psychological Service (NEPS), the National Council for Special Needs (NCSE), the Health Services Executive (HSE), FÁS, Visiting Teachers for Travellers (VTTs), Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP).

11 National Education Helpline

The NEWB operates the country's first national Education Helpline (1890 36 36 66), which is operated by trained Educational Welfare Officers and provides practical help and guidance to parents and schools on educational issues (see Evaluation of Helpline, page 22). In 2005, over 5,000 calls were dealt with by this service.

12 Guidelines for NEWB Legal Procedures

Under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, the Board has the power to prosecute parents or guardians who are found to be neglectful in protecting a child's right to an education.

In 2005, work commenced on drawing up guidelines which provides guidance and support to Educational Welfare Officers in carrying out their legal functions. If and when a case comes before



the Courts, the EWO must take the role of prosecutor. This is a new experience for many of our staff, and this document details the procedures an individual must follow.

School Attendance Notices

In 2005, the NEWB issued its first School Attendance Notices (SANs), which are legal notices requiring the parent to send the child to a named school for a specified period of time. A SAN is the very first step in taking legal action against parents who have failed over time to co-operate with an EWO's attempts to ensure that their children attend school, and where the trained EWO feels that parents could do more to uphold their children's right to an education.

Exploring Alternatives

Taking legal action against a parent is the very last option and will be taken in exceptional cases if it is the only way a child's right to education can be safeguarded.

In May of 2005 the NEWB hosted a conference to explore an alternative option to fines or imprisonment for parents who come before the Courts on matters of school attendance. The conference was rooted in experiences, services and initiatives already being provided by professionals in fields ranging from legal aid to educational outreach services to family support services.

It is anticipated that the resulting recommendations from the conference and other exploratory work being carried out by the NEWB could be used to provide an opportunity for parents to improve their parenting skills, their ability to access supports and services, their self-esteem and confidence and ultimately their ability to ensure that their hopes for a better education and better life for their children are realised.

The exploratory process also focused on gaps in existing services and initiatives and on areas where the NEWB can take the lead, and where it can support the work of others in ensuring that children

receive an adequate education (see Supporting Policy Development – page 21).

13 Professional Supervision Policy Development and Training

Training and development of staff has been identified by the Board as a high priority. The NEWB's Professional Supervision Policy Development programme provides support, advice, guidance and learning opportunities for staff. Our Professional Supervision policy was developed in 2005 and all educational welfare staff participated in training.

14 Review of the Code of Practice

In the light of new organisational and on-the-ground experience it was decided to commence work on the redrafting of the NEWB's Code of Practice. The protocols outlined for dealing with a wide variety of facets encountered by NEWB staff in their everyday work are accompanied by notations, which are themselves rooted in the often complex and subtle situations that present.



15 Child Protection Policy

The NEWB is committed to safeguarding the welfare of children and young people. To this end, a draft NEWB Child Protection Policy, consistent with *Our Duty To Care* and *Children First*, the national guidelines for the protection and welfare of children, was developed in 2005 which outlines:

- Ensuring that personnel are equipped with appropriate skill, knowledge and values to deliver an effective service to children
- Ensuring that personnel are aware of relevant legislation, national guidelines and local child protection procedures and protocols.
- Assisting staff in identifying and reporting child abuse
- Maximising the capacity of staff to protect children effectively
- How to ensure confidentiality
- What is good practice amongst personnel
- How to properly respond to suspicions and allegations
- Way in which personnel are recruited and selected to ensure their suitability for working with children
- What systems are in place to ensure that all staff working with children are routinely and regularly monitored
- The Board's recruitment policy, which takes all reasonable steps to eliminate people who are not suitable to work with children

In addition, in 2005 all educational welfare staff were given *Children First* Training: this training will be mandatory for all new staff.

16 Case Management System

In 2005, the NEWB developed a new Case Management IT System (CMS) to enable Educational Welfare Officers to prioritise and efficiently manage their cases from referral through to case closure. Situated on the NEWB's intranet, it has been designed to be simple to use and easy to navigate for all staff. In 2005, it was rolled out on a pilot basis.

Absences of over 20 days are entered into the system, where they are screened and may subsequently become an 'active case'. Referrals can be entered *via* an online form, or by selecting high-risk students through their absence data. The system allows cases to be progressed from referral through to closure, with current paperwork processes replaced by a variety of screen applications.



CORPORATE SERVICES

1 Corporate Governance

In response to the *Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies*, the NEWB has established an Internal Audit Committee which will be responsible for developing an Internal Audit Plan for the organisation.

2 The Board

The Board of the NEWB held nine formal meetings in 2005. The Board also has a number of committees that meet individually four times a year. Outlined below is an overview of each committee's function (the membership of each Committee is outlined in **Appendix 4**).

Communications Committee

To advise the Board on the development and implementation of its communication strategy and to consider other matters that may be referred to the Committee from time to time.

Research Committee

To advise the Board on its research function; to develop and oversee the implementation of its research programme; and to advise on other matters that may be referred to the Committee from time to time.

Corporate Governance Committee

To draw up and recommend a code of corporate governance for the Board.

Education Committee

To advise the Board on matters relating to education and schools generally and other issues that may be referred to it from time to time.

3 Staff Handbook

In 2005, the National Educational Welfare Board developed its first Staff Handbook. The Handbook was compiled to give every member of staff direct access to the NEWB's employment policies and practices, as well as to provide staff with access to various application forms which they may require. The Handbook is accessible to all staff through the NEWB intranet, where it will be updated regularly as legislation, policy and practice evolve.

4 Staff Education and Development Policy

The National Educational Welfare Board encourages employees to pursue further development, training and education that could lead to their advancement within the National Educational Welfare Board by reimbursing them for courses of study taken at colleges, universities or other educational institutions during a regularly scheduled academic semester, and for which evidence of satisfactory completion can be shown. The National Educational Welfare Board actively promotes programmes, which lead to certification or accreditation from well-established bodies.

In addition, the Training and Development Sub-Committee of Partnership is currently working on an Organisational Training and Development Plan which will support the NEWB's 2005 – 2007 Strategic Plan.

The Plan will identify competencies, skills and training needs required by Educational Welfare Officers, and administrative staff in the context of their work and will be used to form the basis of an appraisal system which would identify where there is a need for staff development support.



5 Recruitment

In 2005, 10 additional staff were employed by the NEWB. NEWB staff have backgrounds in a wide variety of disciplines from across the education and welfare sectors: this wealth of diverse experience strengthens the organisation's ability to deliver its services effectively.

Strict vetting procedures are a vital part of the NEWB's recruitment process. All prospective employees are requested to sign a declaration in relation to criminal activity and are subject to background checks by the Garda Central Vetting Unit. In addition, verified employment references are obtained.

6 Employee Assistance Programme

The National Educational Welfare Board is committed to maintaining a safe and healthy working environment for employees. To this end the NEWB's HR department is currently developing an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which will provide support for employees experiencing personal or work-related problems, improve productivity and support the general health and well-being of employees.

7 Employee Relations

The Board has agreed an Industrial Relations protocol with IMPACT, to encourage matters to be addressed speedily and at local level.

8 Flexible Working

The Board has developed a draft flexible working policy, to allow staff greater flexibility in their working hours, and to support an ethos of work life balance.

9 Health and Safety

The NEWB is committed to ensuring that the health, safety and welfare of its staff is a priority. In 2005, a NEWB Safety Statement was compiled following the completion of specific risk assessments of the Educational Welfare Service and at NEWB offices and consultation took place with staff in this regard.

The aim of the Health and Safety Statement is to develop a preventative strategy in matters of safety, health and welfare in the workplace. This will be achieved through the maintenance of good standards of accommodation, the identification of (and where feasible the elimination of) hazards, the provision of information for staff, and finally through ongoing consultation with staff interests on matters of safety, health and welfare.

10 Quality Customer Service

In response to the Government's Quality Customer Service Initiative, pre-planning regarding the development of the NEWB's first Quality Customer Service Action Plan and a Customer Charter commenced in 2005. The consultation phase of this process is a priority objective for 2006.

11 Performance Management and Development System (PMDS)

In accordance with the Government's Civil and Public Service Modernisation Programme, the Board is now developing a framework for the implementation of the PMDS.

12 Sustaining Progress

The NEWB is committed to meeting the challenges posed by the National Agreement, Sustaining Progress. Performance targets identified in 2005 were successfully achieved. The NEWB's Partnership Committee is instrumental in overseeing that goals are met and reports are submitted on time.



RESEARCH

Overview

The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 confers a broad remit on the NEWB in relation to the promotion of school attendance. This remit spans duties towards society, families, training agencies, curriculum development, schools and children. It places a duty on the NEWB to support schools in the preparation of school attendance strategies and codes of behaviour, and to monitor their effectiveness in preventing absenteeism.

The Act envisages that the NEWB's research and development activities will have several dimensions:

- Conducting and commissioning research relating to school attendance.
- Disseminating that research.
- Monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of strategies and programmes aimed at preventing non-attendance.

The NEWB Research Strategy

The NEWB's Research Strategy was developed in 2005 under the auspices of the Board's Research Committee (see page 29). The main focus and purpose of the research strategy was set out by the Research Committee as follows:

- To support the Board's overall strategic objectives (as expressed in our Strategic Plan 2005 – 2007).
- To facilitate evidence-based decision-making.
- To provide access to models of best practice in relation to key areas of the Board's work.
- To support policy development.

The Research Committee also set out a clear direction for the approach to be adopted by the Board in its research activities. It was decided that research undertaken or commissioned by the Board would:

- Adopt an integrated approach that recognises the linkages between all the factors at societal, family, community, school and individual level that impact on school attendance.

- Focus on the role of all the parties who can impact on children's educational welfare and their school attendance in particular.
- Identify ways in which all these parties can be supported effectively.
- Open debate and dialogue amongst stakeholders about evidence-based best practice.
- Focus on the use of research for improvement purposes.

By adopting a broadly based, utilisation-focused Research Strategy, the Board will avoid a fragmented approach, or undue reliance on small-scale projects, unless those projects fit within the wider framework and advance the overall Research Strategy in a coherent way. The Board will also engage in knowledge generation that can be put to use in schools and communities in a practical manner.

The Research Programme for 2005

The programme adopted for 2005 was seen as being the first step in the implementation of the Research Strategy. The intention is that this foundation will be built upon and developed over a period of time, with a view to developing a solid corpus of research to underpin policy development and practice within the NEWB. The focus of the 2005 programme was on the following three areas:

- School attendance and non-attendance.
- Supporting specific areas of policy and practice development.
- Building organisational and service quality.

1 School attendance and non-attendance

Quantitative and qualitative information on school attendance and non-attendance in Ireland is extremely limited. However, this information is essential to enable the NEWB, the Department of Education & Science, schools and other agencies to adopt effective policies and strategies to address school attendance issues.



It is also essential in order to enable the Board to deploy its staff in a way that will begin to tackle the problem of absenteeism to best effect.

With a view to beginning to build a solid corpus of school attendance data, a number of projects were commissioned. The aim of these projects is to deepen our understanding of school attendance issues and the factors that underlie poor attendance and to improve our knowledge about the levels and patterns of school attendance in Ireland.

Study of attendance and students' school experiences and later life chances (ESRI)

The aim of this study is to:

- Provide a comprehensive overview of literature and existing data in the broad area of attendance.
- Improve our understanding of issues around attendance.
- Highlight a number of priorities for policy and research.
- Guide the NEWB's strategy to deal with school attendance.

This study begins with an exploration of the international and Irish literature around school attendance, policy concerns within this area and initiatives that have attempted to address questions surrounding school attendance, as well as more general areas such as educational under-achievement, school disaffection and early school leaving.

The study then examines existing data from ESRI research in the field of education, with a specific focus on drawing together the learning from those studies about the experience of school attendance.

Looking in depth at the experience of poor school attendance

In addition to gathering high-level data about school attendance and school attendance strategies, the Board sees the need for in-depth qualitative analysis of the experience of parents, students, teachers,

school principals and education welfare officers in relation to school attendance. These insights should prove helpful in the development of effective responses to school attendance.

A pilot study in ten schools (five Primary schools and five Post-Primary schools) was undertaken by MORI. The purpose of this study was to gather the views of teachers, parents, students and Educational Welfare Officers about the reasons for absenteeism, and the kinds of interventions that might help parents to ensure that children attend school. This study also considers approaches to getting deeper insight into the patterns of absences among children missing more than 20 days in the school year.

Analysis of annual school attendance data

In accordance with the requirements of the Education (Welfare) Act, the NEWB gathers annual attendance data from schools. This data is analysed to provide information for policy making and planning purposes. The data provides essential baseline information against which changes in levels of school attendance, and trends in school attendance can be measured over time. The analysis of the annual attendance report for the school year 2004/2005 shows that:

- Overall figures for attendance are consistent with 2003/2004 at both Primary and Post Primary level.
- However, in many of the areas specifically targeted by the NEWB, such as the most disadvantaged schools at both Primary and Post Primary level, urban schools, and RAPID schools, annual percentage attendance is higher compared to 2003/2004.
- Furthermore, the mean percentage of students absent 20 days or more is lower in many of the areas targeted by the NEWB, compared to 2003/2004.

The full report is available on the NEWB website.



2 Supporting specific areas of policy and practice development

In addition to formal research programmes, the NEWB's Research Strategy also includes development work on priority areas of policy. This development work is undertaken in partnership with the management and staff of the Education Welfare Service.

During 2005, development work was done on a range of policy and practice areas including examining alternatives to fines and prison where parents come before the Courts as a result of their children's non-attendance at school. At the request of the Minister for Children, Brian Lenihan, T.D., work began on looking at the scope for supportive interventions with parents who are at risk of prosecution on account of their children's non-attendance at school. In particular, the possible utility of parenting programmes was examined.

An inter-agency conference, opened by Minister Lenihan, was attended by representatives from a wide cross-section of agencies involved with children and families, school and Department of Education & Science personnel, Education Welfare Officers and staff from Northern Ireland education welfare services exchanged their experience of successful forms of support for families, and examined scope and possibilities.

Analysis of the deliberations of the conference highlighted the complexity of the support needed for parents who are at risk of prosecution, and the need for carefully crafted inter-agency responses.

Implementation of Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act

Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act provides for the registration of children who are in receipt of education in a place other than a recognised school.

This section also provides for the recognition of certain programmes of education, training or

instruction or work experience prescribed by the Minister. Prescribed programmes do not need to be assessed by the NEWB.

There is a significant number of children and young people receiving education, training and instruction under programmes that do not meet the requirements of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 at present.

Where an 'early leaver' opts to attend a programme of education or training other than in a recognised school (or a school that has been assessed for the purposes of Section 14), that programme may be regarded by the Education Welfare Officer as the best option for the child, and preferable, in the child's best interests, to serving a School Attendance Notice. The provisions of Section 14 would then come into play.

The programmes of education and training attended by early school leavers vary widely. They include mainstream training programmes operated by FÁS, Youthreach programmes, and a range of community-based programmes operated by a variety of providers. The focus may include personal development, continuing education, vocational development and work experience.

Section 14.19(b) exempts a child who is participating in a programme of education, training, instruction or work experience prescribed by the Minister from the registration requirements that pertain to any child who is not being educated in a recognised school.

Following a detailed review, the NEWB has now made recommendations to the Minister for Children that he would use his powers under the Act to prescribe certain courses under Section 14.19(b) of the Act. (Detailed arrangements for the implementation process will be worked out with the relevant agencies.)



3 Building organisational and service quality

The NEWB is committed to a programme of ongoing monitoring and development of quality in service delivery. The Board's research programme is geared towards providing support for that strategic objective. During 2005, a number of initiatives were taken to monitor and develop service quality these included the following research projects:

Giving children a voice in the work of the NEWB

There are many reasons for involving children and young people in the work of service delivery organisations and one of the most important is that this is now national public policy (National Children's Strategy). In addition to this, it is clear that there are direct benefits to children and young people themselves in terms of giving them additional skills such as teamwork, negotiating and an understanding of how public policy works.

Studies have shown that by giving children and young people a say in how policies and services are developed, provided, evaluated and improved will ensure that those policies and services really meet the needs of the children and young people and that unmet needs are recognised.

The NEWB is committed to implementing Government policy on the participation of children in organisations providing services that affect them. As a first step, the Board commissioned a study of the options and possibilities for involving children and young people as partners in the work

of the Board. This study included a consultation process with children themselves. The findings of the study are currently being used as the basis for developing a Board Position Paper which offers various strategies to support children's participation in its work.

Evaluation of the Helpline

As an innovative way of implementing the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, the National Educational Welfare Board launched the Education Helpline in March 2004. The Education Helpline is a 'LoCall' service, which callers can access from any part of the country for the cost of a local call.

The aim of the Helpline is to provide information and advice on matters to do with school attendance or any other matters that fall within the remit of the Board. Parents, teachers and others have used the Helpline extensively since it was established, with over 5,000 calls received in 2005.

The evaluation of the Helpline was carried out for the Board by Horwath Consulting. The project was developmental in nature, taking stock of the Helpline after one year in operation. The evaluation will support the ongoing development of the Helpline, and any changes needed to the scope, role and focus of the Helpline service. The evaluation should act as a quality assurance mechanism, at this point in the development of the service.

The evaluation report will be used as a working tool to optimise the operation of the Helpline, and to assist in ongoing monitoring of its effectiveness.



OUTLOOK

In 2005, the National Educational Welfare Board devised, produced and launched its Strategic Plan for 2005 – 2007. This document is a source of guidance and direction for the multi-faceted work of the Board and its staff – it is drawn up in the context of significant school absenteeism and a Government policy framework committed to meeting children’s needs and to the alleviation of educational disadvantage. The Board is committed to meeting the objectives of the legislation through the development of the full range of services we have envisaged – in educational services, corporate governance and research. However, we need to increase our compliment of staff and resources to ensure our effectiveness.

In 2006, we will see the production of an updated Code of Practice for all NEWB staff. We will also see the expansion of a variety of protocols we have created with our welfare and educational partners from other agencies. Of great relevance to our daily work, we will continue to develop our research in relation to understanding the underlying reasons behind absenteeism. Further, 2005 saw the initial steps in producing our own Child Protection Policy, which will be published in 2006.

In 2006, we expect to see our services spread to more cities and towns in Ireland. Our data shows that the NEWB is particularly effective in areas of disadvantage (RAPID) and we expect to see that trend continue and improve, although we recognise that school absenteeism is a problem that transcends social boundaries. As more schools utilise the web-based attendance register, www.schoolreturn.ie, we are increasingly enabled to produce stronger evidence-based policy. In 2006, we will see School Attendance Strategies developed and rolled out, based on the extensive research programme we have undertaken.

The finalisation of school protocols clarifying responsibilities around school attendance is a key objective for 2006. Guidelines for schools on Attendance Strategies and Codes of Behaviour will be advanced significantly in 2006. Both sets of Guidelines have the potential to positively influence the work of schools, as well as enhance the educational outcomes for children and young people.

Going forward in 2006 we will endeavour to make the best use of the resources available to use and prioritise children in greatest need of our service.



MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL WELFARE BOARD

The members of the National Educational Welfare Board in December 2005 were:

Dr. Ann Louise Gilligan (*Chairperson*), *St.Patrick's College, Drumcondra*

Mr Eddie Ward, *Chief Executive Officer*

Mr Brendan Callaghan, *Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform*

Mr Declan Dunne, *Ballymun Partnership*

Ms Fionnuala Kilfeather, *National Parents Council*

Mr Gerry Mangan, *Department of Social & Family Affairs*

Mr Fergal McCarthy, *Teacher Unions*

Mr Ian Murphy, *Department of Education & Science*

Mr Gus O'Connell, *FÁS*

Mr Donal O'Connor, *Educational Welfare Officers*

Mr Gearoid Ó Maoilmhichil, *Voluntary Bodies*

Sr. Eileen Randles, *School Management Organisations*

Mr Seamus Moore, *Health Service Executive*



SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AT PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Summary of findings from the Annual Attendance Reports submitted by schools for the 2004/2005 school year

Table 1: Response Rates from Schools

Response Rates from Schools		
	2004/05	2003/04
Primary	83.9%	82.8%
Post-Primary	76%	71%

Table 2: Levels of Attendance Nationally

	Primary		Post-Primary	
	2004/05	2003/04	2004/05	2003/04
Attendance	94.2% or 11 days absence on average for each student	94.1%	91.6% or 14 days absence on average for each student	91.3%
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	10% or 1 in 10	10.7%	18.8% or almost 1 in 5	18.9%

Table 3: Difference between Levels of Attendance in the least Disadvantaged Post-Primary Schools and the most Disadvantaged Post-Primary Schools

Post-Primary Schools	Least Disadvantaged		Most Disadvantaged	
	2004/05	2003/04	2004/05	2003/04
Attendance	94.2% or 10 days absence on average for each student	94.6%	87.0% or 21 days absence on average for each student	86.1%
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	9.2% or 1 in 11	8.5%	34.8% or almost 1 in 3	38%



Table 4: Difference between Levels of Attendance in Post-Primary Schools in RAPID Areas and those in Non-RAPID Areas

Post-Primary Schools	RAPID Areas		Non-RAPID Areas	
	2004/05	2003/04	2004/05	2003/04
Attendance	90.7% or 15.5 days absence on average for each student	87.8%	91.8% or 13.5 days absence on average for each student	91.5%
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	22% or 1 in 4.5	26%	18.1% or 1 in 5.5	18.6%

Table 5: Difference between Levels of Attendance in Schools Participating in the School Completion Programme and those not Participating.

Post-Primary Schools	School Completion Programme		Not in School Completion Programme	
	2004/05	2003/04	2004/05	2003/04
Attendance	88.1% or 20 days absence on average for each student	N/A	92.1% or 13 days absence on average for each student	N/A
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	30.6% or almost 1 in 3	N/A	17.1% or 1 in 6	N/A

Table 6: Difference between Levels of Attendance in Primary Schools in RAPID Areas and those in Non-RAPID Areas

Primary Schools	RAPID Areas		Non-RAPID Areas	
	2004/05	2003/04	2004/05	2003/04
Attendance	91.9% or 15 days absence on average for each student	90.8%	94.4% or 10 days absence on average for each student	94.3%
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	19.0% or almost 1 in 5	23.7%	9.3% or almost 1 in 11	9.9%



Table 7: Difference between Levels of Attendance in Urban Primary Schools

Primary Schools	Least Disadvantaged		Most Disadvantaged	
	2004/05	2003/04	2004/05	2003/04
Attendance	94.9% or 9 days absence on average for each student	94.9%	90.5% or 17 days absence on average for each student	89.6%
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	6.9% or 1 in 14	7.3%	24.2% or almost 1 in 4	28.7%

Table 8: Difference between Levels of Attendance in Rural Primary Schools

Primary Schools	Least Disadvantaged		Most Disadvantaged	
	2004/05	2003/04	2004/05	2003/04
Attendance	95.2% or 9 days absence on average for each student	95.3%	94.5% or 10 days absence on average for each student	94.3%
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	5.9% or 1 in 16	6.3%	9.4% or almost 1 in 11	9.9%



MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL IMPLEMENTATION GROUP 2005

Mr Eddie Ward, Chief Executive Officer, *NEWB – Chair*
Mr Frank Smith, Director of Educational Services, *NEWB*
Ms Eileen Fahey, *Acting Director of Educational Services (mid – 2005)*
Mr Neil Ryan, *IT Manager, NEWB*
Mr Sean McCarthy, *TUI*
Mr Gerry McCaul, *JMB*
Mr Michael Naughton, *ACCS*
Ms Sheila Nunan, *INTO*
Mr Stephen Falvey, *Department of Education & Science*
Sr Eileen Randles, *School Management*
Ms Jacinta Stewart, *IVEA*
Ms Anne McElduff, *INTO*
Ms Joan McLoughlin, *NPC, Parent Primary*
Ms Eleanor Petrie, *NPC, Post-Primary*
Ms Susie Hall, *ASTI*
Mr Don McCluskey, *Teacher Unions*
Fr. Dan O'Connor, *CPMSA*



BOARD COMMITTEES

The Board of the NEWB has a number of committees that meet individually four times a year. Outlined below is an overview of each committee's function and details of members.

1 Communications Committee

Terms of Reference

To advise the Board on the development and implementation of its communication strategy and to consider other matters that may be referred to the Committee from time to time.

Membership

Eileen Randles, *Board Member and Chair*
 Fergal McCarthy, *Board Member*
 Brendan Callaghan, *Board Member*
 Eddie Ward, *Chief Executive Officer*
 Laura Slevin, *Director of Corporate Services*
 Donal O'Connor, *Board Member, EWO*
 Eileen Fahey, *Acting Director of Educational Services*

2 Research Committee

Terms of Reference

To advise the Board on its research function; to develop and oversee the implementation of its research programme; and to advise on other matters that may be referred to the Committee from time to time.

Membership

Ann Louise Gilligan, *Board Chairperson and Chair*
 Gearóid Ó Maoilmhichíl, *Board Member*
 Declan Dunne, *Board Member*
 Gerry Mangan, *Board member*
 Guss O Connell, *Board member*
 Eileen Fahey, *Acting Director of Educational Services*

3 Corporate Governance Committee

Terms of reference

To draw up and recommend a code of corporate governance for the Board.

Membership

Declan Dunne, *Board member and Chair*
 Fionnuala Kilfeather, *Board Member*
 Laura Slevin, *Director of Corporate Services*

4 Education Committee

Terms of Reference

To advise the Board on matters relating to education and schools generally and other issues that may be referred to it from time to time

Membership

Ann Louise Gilligan, *Board Chairperson and Chair*
 Fionnuala Kilfeather, *Board Member*
 Sr. Eileen Randles, *Board Member*
 Declan Dunne, *Board Member*
 Ian Murphy, *Board member*
 Fergal McCarthy, *Board member*
 Eddie Ward, *Chief Executive Officer*
 Eileen Fahey, *Acting Director of Educational Services*