

PRE BUDGET SUBMISSION 2006 Highlighting the Cost of School Absenteeism

1. Children Missing School: The Facts

Annual school returns to NEWB highlight the scale of the problem of absences from school. The returns show that, while this problem is greater in areas of social and economic disadvantage, it is a universal problem affecting all schools in all areas of the country.¹

- 10% of all primary students (approximately 47,000 students) miss more than 20 days from school each year or 11% of the school year.
- 19% of all post-primary students (approximately 37,000 students under 16) miss more than 20 days from school each year or 12% of the school year.
- Every primary student misses on average 10 days in the school year; 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.

Analysis of absences for a sample of students absent for 20 days or more indicates that more than a third of these may be absent for at least 40 days.²

Further details of attendance and non-attendance levels in 2004/2005 are provided in Appendix 1.

2. Absenteeism and School Retention

Recent Department of Education and Science statistics highlight the extent of early school leaving.³ Of particular concern is the number of children who leave school under the statutory school leaving age, and without any qualifications.

Absenteeism is the one of the strongest factors associated with early school leaving.⁴ The strength of this link between missing school and early leaving is confirmed in several research studies.

¹School Attendance Data at Primary and Post-primary Levels 2004/2005. NEWB, October 2005.

²MORI *Research Project on School Attendance*. NEWB (Publication pending).

³Department of Education and Science *Retention Rates of Pupils in Second Level Schools*. September 2005.

⁴Morgan, M. *Early School Leaving Interventions: International Comparisons*. Combat Poverty Agency, 1998.

3. The Social and Economic Costs of Absenteeism

Absenteeism has serious costs for individuals, for families, for the State, for teachers and schools. There are also significant costs, rarely mentioned, for those students who do attend school regularly.

The costs for individual children and families

High levels of absenteeism can lead to poor achievement and poor educational outcomes. The possible consequences of early school leaving for individuals, in terms of poorer life chances, are well documented.

Even while still in school, NEWB research suggests that students who miss large amounts of school time can experience social and emotional costs through alienation from peers and staff.

Parents of children who are chronic non-attenders experience stress and health costs and absences from work as they try to deal with attendance problems.

Children who leave school early tend not to reengage with education subsequently and therefore remain at a disadvantage throughout their lives.

The costs for society and the State

The costs to the State and society can include the loss of the contribution the young people could have made over their lifetime, the potentially higher levels of draw down of state benefits, increased risk of involvement in anti-social activity and crime, and poorer physical and mental health.

High levels of absenteeism will tend to reduce the impact of the State's investment in education, and, in particular, the investment in addressing educational disadvantage.

Costs for teachers, schools and good attenders

There are significant costs for teachers and for schools, in terms of the time spent investigating absences, and in working to reduce absences and the time spent helping absent students to catch up on gaps in their learning. Students who attend school regularly can miss out also, as more of class time is devoted to helping those who missed days at school.



4. NEWB: Investing in Educational Participation and School Attendance

The legal duties of NEWB

NEWB has the statutory duty to ensure that every child either attends school or otherwise receives an education. In particular, the Board has a key role in following up on children who are not attending school regularly, and where there is a concern about the child's educational welfare.

The return on the State's investment

There is a clear economic and social case for investing in programmes to prevent poor attendance, promote attendance, and support those families who experience serious difficulties in getting their children to school, given the high costs associated with poor attendance and early school leaving.

The State's investment in developing the Board's capacity to maximise school attendance and reduce early school leaving will:

- Help to reduce early school leaving and strengthen school retention.
- Help to reduce the social and economic losses associated with poor attendance and early leaving.
- Help to optimise the impact of the huge investment in education, and in particular, in reducing educational disadvantage.
- Increase the value from the investment to date in the work of the Board.
- Ensure that the Board can deliver on its obligations to children under the legislation and meet the demand for its services from children, families and schools.

The progress made by the Board

Since its establishment in 2002, NEWB has utilised the resources provided in order to progress its service development on several levels, including establishment of the Educational Welfare Service, development of support services, data gathering and analysis for planning purposes, and research and strategic planning. Key areas of progress include the action on all of the following:

- Regional structure established, with five regions across the country.
- Educational Welfare staff in place, delivering service in 26 locations, of which eight (8) were opened in 2005.
- Assessment and registration process established for children in independent primary schools and those being educated at home. To date, 136 assessments of individual children have been completed and children registered.
- Lo Call Education Helpline set up for parents and schools, dealing with over 5,000 calls per year.
- Almost 20,000 cases involving students with reported school attendance difficulties have been resolved since January 2004.
- Guidance has issued to all schools outlining the arrangements for reporting student absences. A national website has been established to support schools in this work.
- Comprehensive research programme initiated.
- Strategic Plan 'Every Day Counts' developed to guide the Board's development over the period 2005-2007.

More information on the work of NEWB is contained in Appendix 2.

The Board's Strategic focus

NEWB has a clear strategic focus to guide its development. The Board's Strategic Plan 2005-2007 aims to build a strong organisation that can deliver on its duty to children, schools and families. 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.
- To make a strong evidence-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 developing evidence-based policy and practice.
- To be a learning organisation that will support and develop its staff.



5. The Challenges Facing NEWB

A developing organisation

NEWB is an organisation in its development phase. However, the huge cohort of children who are missing out on education have needs that go well beyond the developing capacity of the organisation at present. The numbers of students entitled to a service from NEWB under the terms of the legislation far outstrips the current capacity to respond.

The ratio of Educational Welfare Officers to school population is significantly below the international norms; the management of the demand for the service requires the Board's Educational Welfare Service to prioritise children with the most significant levels of absenteeism, thus running the risk of developing as a reactive, fire-fighting service, rather than as a proactive, prevention-focused service as envisaged in the Education (Welfare) Act 2000.

Chronic cases of non-attendance

The law demands that the Board responds when certain thresholds of non-attendance are reached. Educational Welfare staff struggle to meet these demands in the most disadvantaged areas. Because of the huge volume of referrals, the quality of the response is being diluted. Outside of these disadvantaged areas, the Board can only respond where children are absent for 60 days or more, or where they are out of school.

Early intervention

All the evidence suggests that early intervention is better and more effective than intervention when poor school attendance patterns have become established. The emphasis up to now has been very much of providing a service to children with established difficulties. Families and schools expect this. The Board is not in a position to respond when difficulties first emerge early on in children's lives.

Prevention strategies

It has not been possible to get to the more preventative work that must be done by schools and families and by others in society through more positive attitudes to school attendance. The Board has a key role in developing and supporting schools in adopting more proactive strategies to keep children in school and to reduce absenteeism. Under the law, each school must have an EWO assigned to them. However, this is not possible at present.

16/17 year olds who leave school to take up employment

Under the law, 16 and 17 years olds must be registered with the Board before they can enter employment. This part of the Act has not been operationalised due to the absence of resources. The purpose of this section is to ensure that young early school leavers continue in some form of education up to 18 years of age.

Developing the Board's infrastructure

To be effective and to use its front line staffing to best effect, the Board requires to build its infrastructure in areas of information technology, research and development, data gathering for planning and evaluation purposes and strategic planning, as well as developing effective human resources and administrative systems.

6. Objectives for 2006

The Board has set a number of targets for 2006, in line with its Strategic Plan:

- Provide a service in the counties that do not have a service at present.
- Develop best practice models of service, to form the basis of future planning and service development.
- Reduce overall caseloads progressively in all areas.
- Implement key sections of the Education (Welfare) Act that are currently not being implemented.
- Strengthen the administrative, technical and research capacity of the board, so as to provide the essential infrastructure for the developing organisation.

7. Requirements to meet these objectives

The staffing requirements for 2006 are for fifty (50) additional posts, of which forty-six (46) will be assigned to the direct delivery of service to children, families and schools. Four (4) posts would be deployed in strengthening the essential administrative and human resources infrastructure for the field services.

The required posts will be distributed as follows:

Type of posts	Number of posts
Educational Welfare Officers	37
Senior Educational Welfare Officers	9
Clerical support	4

Educational Welfare Officer posts will be deployed to meet the following objectives:

- Provide access to the service for children and schools in all counties.
- Reduce overall caseloads.
- Develop strategies to deal with the particular needs of specific population groups for example, Traveller children, early school leavers.
- Develop and test preventive strategies.

8. The Cost

The additional 50 staff requested by NEWB for 2006 will bring our total staffing levels to 164 of whom 145 will be directly involved in service delivery. The total cost of the 2006 budget proposal is €14,001,831 which represents an increase of €6,163,831 or 78% over our current 2005 budget of €7,838,000.

A detailed breakdown of the budget requested for 2006 is outlined in Appendix 3.

APPENDIX 1

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

Introduction

Up to 2004, Ireland had no national data on the levels of student attendance in our schools. This matter was addressed by the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, which requires all schools to submit a report to NEWB on levels of school attendance.

In 2004, NEWB initiated the collection and analysis of the first set of school attendance data for Ireland, relating to the school year 2003/2004. Schools were asked to submit the total number of student days lost through absence, the number of students absent for 20 days or more, and the number of students who were expelled.

Data from the analysis of the returns for the 2004/2005 are set out in the tables below. The findings from both years highlight the extent of the problem of non-attendance and the required scale of any response. The overall attendance levels and the proportion of children absent for more than 20 days are consistent with the figures for 2003/2004, albeit with a very marginal improvement.

Table 1: Levels of Attendance Nationally

	Primary	Post-Primary
Attendance	94.2% or 10 days absence on average for each student	91.6% or 14 days absence on average for each student
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	10% or 1 in 10	18.8% or almost 1 in 5

Table 2: 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
Attendance	94.2% or 10 days absence on average for each student	87.0% or 21 days absence on average for each student
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	9.2% or 1 in 11	34.8% or more than 1 in 3

Table 3: 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
Attendance	90.7% or 15.5 days absence on average for each student	91.8% or 13.5 days absence on average for each student
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	22% or 1 in 4.5	18.1% or 1 in 5.5

Table 4: 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
Attendance	88.1% or 20 days absence on average for each student	92.1% or 13 days absence on average for each student
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	30.6% or almost 1 in 3	17.1% or 1 in 6

Table 5: Difference between Levels of Attendance in Primary Schools in RAPID Areas and those in Non-RAPID Areas

Primary Schools	RAPID Areas	Non-RAPID Areas
Attendance	91.9% or 15 days absence on average for each student	94.4% or 10 days absence on average for each student
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	19.0% or almost 1 in 5	9.3% or almost 1 in 11

Table 6: Difference between Levels of Attendance in Urban Primary Schools

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

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

Primary Schools	Least Disadvantaged	Most Disadvantaged
Attendance	95.2% or 9 days absence on average for each student	94.5% or 10 days absence on average for each student
Percentage of students absent 20 days or more	5.9% or 1 in 16	9.4% or almost 1 in 11

Table 8: Response Rate from Schools

Primary	83.9%
Post-Primary	76%

APPENDIX 2

THE WORK OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL WELFARE BOARD

Education (Welfare) Act 2000

The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 provides a new framework for promoting regular school attendance, tackling the problem of absenteeism and early school leaving.

National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB)

Set up in 2002 under the Education (Welfare) Act and launched nationally in December 2003, NEWB has a statutory function to ensure that every child either attends a school or otherwise receives an education. The service also has a responsibility to children not being educated at recognised schools, for example in the home, as well as a responsibility to young people who might leave school at age 16 to take up employment.

Under the Act, an Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) must take action when a school reports a student absence of 20 days or where the school is concerned about a student's attendance. The action taken will vary depending on the circumstances of each case. Outside of RAPID* areas, EWOs follow up on "urgent" or "acute" cases where children are absent for 60 days or more, have no school place or have been expelled, and where there is a care or court dimension.

Community Based Service

To date 94 staff members have been appointed with 83 engaged in service delivery across five regions. Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) are currently working in the RAPID* areas of the 6 major cities and 12 regional towns. Within its service delivery staff, NEWB currently has 5 Regional Managers, 61 EWOs, 12 Senior EWOs and 5 clerical posts. There is 11 head office staff.

At the end of September 2005, the Board had 7,900 cases on hand, representing an average caseload of 108 cases per officer.



**Summary of Regional Work Activity:
January to September 2005**

NEWB Region	New Cases	School Visits	Home Visits	Letters to Parents	Meetings with other agencies	Case conferences under Children Act 2001	Legal Notices Issued	Court Appearances
Dublin City	2616	1193	2085	2590	512	62	7	0
Leinster North	2646	836	1836	1595	497	29	11	0
Leinster South	1416	542	1137	1586	343	20	0	0
Munster	1523	1152	1780	2520	453	18	13	1
West/ North West	785	444	852	1084	252	18	0	3
TOTALS	8986	4167	7690	9375	2057	147	31	4

NEWB Region	Cases @ start of January 2005	New Cases	Closed Cases	Cases @ end of September 2005	EWOs
Dublin City	4764	2616	4186	3194	22
Leinster North	947	2646	2744	849	14
Leinster South	1778	1416	1621	1573	14
Munster	1196	1523	1230	1489	14
West/ North West	1275	785	1265	795	9
TOTALS	9960	8986	11046	7900	73

APPENDIX 3

BUDGETING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The additional 50 staff requested by NEWB for 2006 will bring our total staffing levels to 164 of whom 145 will be directly involved in service delivery. This includes the 20 staff for which funding was provided for in this years budget but approval to recruit has not been received. The total cost of the 2006 budget proposal is €14,001,831 which represents an increase of €6,163,831 or 78% over our current 2005 budget of €7,838,000.

The costing below represents the total running costs of the organisation for 2006, assuming the extra staffing resources are sanctioned in the 2006 budget.

2006 Budget Requirements

Budget Heading	Cost €
Total Staff Costs	8,950,476
Recruitment & Training	571,282
Travel & Subsistence	500,000
Accommodation Overheads	1,157,645
Information Technology	982,355
Communications	730,944
Research	533,591
Legal, Professional & Insurance	305,538
Office Supplies	270,000
Total 2006	14,001,831
Total 2005	7,838,000
Additional Budget	6,163,831
% Increase	78%