

Early Start Pre-School Programme

Introduction

The Early Start Programme was established in 1994 in 40 primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage and is aimed at pre-school children aged 3 to 4 years. The schools are located in Cork (6 schools), Dublin (26), Galway (1), Louth (2), Limerick (3), Waterford (1) and Wicklow (1). The programme is a one-year early intervention scheme to meet the needs of children of pre-school age who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. The project involves an educational programme to enhance overall development, promote positive educational outcomes and offset the effects of social disadvantage. Parental involvement is one of the core elements of the programme in recognition of the parent/guardian as the prime educator of the child and to encourage the parent/guardian to become involved in his/her child's education.

Capacity

The Focused Policy Assessment of the Early Start Programme¹ indicates that, in the 2013/14 school year, there were 40 Early Start units which had capacity to cater for 1,650 children in total. In 2019 these 40 schools in the same locations remain in operation.

The 40 units are broken down into 15 'full' units and 25 'half' units:

- "Full Units" consist of two qualified teachers and two childcare workers. A full unit can cater for 60 children through two separate morning sessions from 9.00am-11.30am and two afternoon sessions from 12.00pm-2.30pm. A teacher and childcare worker work with a maximum of 15 children in each session
- "Half Units" consist of one qualified teacher and one childcare worker and has the capacity to cater for a total of 30 children, with 15 in a morning session and another 15 in the afternoon session.

Expenditure

The total cost of Early Start in 2013/14 was €5.6 million and expenditure is composed of:

1. salary costs of the teachers and childcare workers that are employed in each unit (96% of expenditure in 2013/2014)
2. grants for:
 - day to day running costs of the centre
 - purchase of materials/ equipment
 - development of parental involvement

¹ Department of Education and Skills, June 2014. *Focussed Policy Assessment Early Start Programme*. Available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Focussed-Policy-Assessment-Early-Start-Programme-Early-Years-Education-Policy-Unit.pdf> [last accessed 26/11/2019]

Expenditure in 2013/14 represented a 11.7% decrease in expenditure since 2008/2009, a reduction is mainly attributable to a reduction in salary costs due to the public sector wage cuts that have been imposed during that period.

Increasing unit cost per child

The unit cost per child enrolled in in Early Start 2013/2014 was €4,474, an increase of 11% since 2008/2009. The main reason for the unit cost increase is a decline in enrolments, mainly attributable to the introduction of ECCE. Whereas Early Start sessions are only 2.5 hours in duration, the ECCE scheme offers 3 hours a day, which makes ECCE more attractive to parents. Similarly, other targeted programmes (CCS, CCSP and TEC) have been introduced and expanded during the same period. These targeted schemes specifically catered for children with parents on low income or in back to work programmes, including training and education.

Enrolments on the Early Start programme peaked at 1,619 children in 2000/01. Enrolments fell by 368 children to a total of 1,251 in 2013/14, which represents a decline of 23% and the decline in enrolments in the years post 2014 has continued.

In 2013/14 there were 399 unfilled places (representing 25% of the total number of places available). This is in marked contrast to the demand for ELC across the DCYA subsidy programmes.

While the cost per child of the ECCE scheme in 2013/2014 was €2,560 (much lower than the cost per child under Early Start at €4,474) the two programmes are not directly comparable. Children participating in Early Start are engaging with a qualified teacher as well as a childcare worker in a class with a maximum of 15 children.

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

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

Targets of Programme

The extent to which the catchment areas for Early Start can be categorised as 'disadvantaged' was assessed using the deprivation index used by Pobal <https://maps.pobal.ie/WebApps/DeprivationIndices/index.html>. The more mixed socio-economic profile within the catchment areas of 9 of the 40 Early Start Units makes it more difficult to assign a single deprivation rating.

While Early Start is intended to target socio-economic disadvantage, the guidelines² for the scheme also indicate that pupils with special needs can be prioritised.

Programme Outcomes

FPA data indicates that Early Start children do not achieve statistically significant differences in terms of educational outcomes when compared to children who have not attended pre-school or who have attended an alternative form of pre-school. However, participation in Early Start appears to result in advantages in terms of 'school readiness'. Early Start professionals are fully qualified and experienced in their relevant disciplines. Early start units have adopted a wide range of strategies to engage parents in their children's learning.

Conclusion

In general the scope and scale of the Early Start programme is difficult to compare to the national DCYA funded universal and targeted early learning and care programmes.

Falling numbers in enrolments (30% in the ten years to 2018/9) in Early Start is continuing. This is largely explained by high uptake of the ECCE programme (93% of eligible children).

Both programmes are fully state funded but the funding model is different. In Early Start, the annual expenditure of €5.6m is composed almost entirely of staff costs. In the 2013/14 school year there were 40 Early Start units which had capacity to cater for 1,650 children. By comparison, the annual ECCE expenditure of €285.5m supports 107,692 (2018/2019 provisional) places at no cost for the parent. This makes the unit cost per child in Early Start 43% more expensive than the unit cost per child availing of ECCE.

² <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Grants-and-Additional-Support/Early-Start-Programme/Early-Start-Guidelines.pdf>