

MORI Ireland Public Sector
Omnibus

Attitudes towards School
Attendance

Guth an Phobail



Prepared by MORI Ireland on
behalf of the:



National Educational
Welfare Board

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Introduction

Guth an Phobail, MORI Ireland's dedicated public sector omnibus, is a syndicated survey of 1,000 interviews with adults aged 18 and over.

This report summarises the results of questions placed on *Guth an Phobail* by the National Educational Welfare Board on the subject of school attendance.

A total of 325 survey respondents were parents of school-going children. For this wave of the omnibus, fieldwork was conducted between November 10th and December 6th 2005.

Interviewing is conducted with a sample of the Irish population, with quotas set on age, gender, social class and region to ensure the sample is representative of the population. Interviewing is conducted using Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) at MORI Ireland's dedicated Telephone Research Centre. A note on the statistical reliability of these results is appended to this document.

Where results or percentages sum to more than 100%, this may be due to computer rounding, multiple responses or the exclusion of 'don't know' categories.

Key Findings

Impact of missing school

The vast majority of members of the public (82%) believe that if children miss more than 20 days at primary school it will affect their schoolwork.

More than half (53%) believes that when primary school children miss more than 10 days a year at school there is an impact on their schoolwork.

25% of people believe that where a child misses more than five schooldays at primary school, their school work will be affected.

9% of people believe that any time missed from primary school will impact on schoolwork.

Only 1% of people believe that it is possible for children to miss more than 60 days at school without that absenteeism impacting on their schoolwork.

Members of the public believe that missing school at post-primary level is even more destructive, in terms of its impact on students' schoolwork.

85% of the public believes that if children miss more than 20 days at post-primary school it will affect their schoolwork.

58% of people believing that missing more than 10 days in a year will affect children's schoolwork at post-primary level.

32% of people believe that if post-primary level children miss more than five days, their schoolwork will be affected.

10% of people believe that any time missed from post-primary school will impact on schoolwork.

More people believe that not missing days at post-primary level is more important than not missing days at primary level. Reasons for this view included: the belief that education at post-primary level is more important; that it is harder to catch up with time lost from school at post primary level, and that parents are less likely to be able to help students to catch up.

Most people (54%) believe that when children miss school it is because their parents do not send them to school. Illness is also seen as a significant reason why children miss school. A significant minority (19%) believe that children miss school because they are not interested in school, while only a tiny minority see school absenteeism as being related to the child's socio-economic background, or suitability of the curriculum. Only 8% of members of the public and 4% of parents believe that children miss school on account of problems with teachers.

Important aspects of school life

Most people (54%) regard personal development as the most important aspect of school life. The formal aspects of schooling are considered most important by a quarter (26%) of the public, while only 18% see extra curricular activities as the most important aspect of school life.

Holidays during term time

The vast majority (84%) of parents of school-going children do not take their children on holidays during term time, while 16% do so. The main reasons given for taking children out of school during term time are that holidays are cheaper (46%), the time suits the family (29%) or that it is the only time people can get time off work (17%).

Awareness of NEWB

42% of parents and 30% of the general public had heard of NEWB. Half of the parents surveyed who were aware of the Board also knew that its role was concerned with school attendance. A further 19% of parents view the Board as having a role in student welfare and protection of children.

I. Missing Days at School

This section summarises the results of questions relating to the frequency of school days pupils could miss, at primary and post-primary level, before it affected their schoolwork. Where relevant or appropriate, the opinions of the general public are compared with the opinions of parents of school-going children.

I.1 Primary level

How many days school do you think children can miss in a school year, for any reason, at primary level before it affects their schoolwork?

According to our survey of 1,000 respondents, eighty-two percent (82%) indicated that if a child missed more than twenty schooldays it would affect their schoolwork. The remaining respondents comprised 11% who indicated that there was no effect from absences in excess of 20 days and 9% who responded that they did not know.

The 82% figure for the respondents who were concerned with absences of more than twenty days includes those respondents who believed that absences of much lower than the twenty days affected the children's schoolwork. More than two-thirds (68%) of the respondents indicated that where a child missed more than fifteen schooldays it would affect their schoolwork. More than half (53%) indicated that where a child missed more than ten schooldays it would affect their schoolwork, while a quarter (25%) indicated that where a child missed more than five schooldays it would affect their schoolwork, and 9% believed that any absence affected schoolwork.

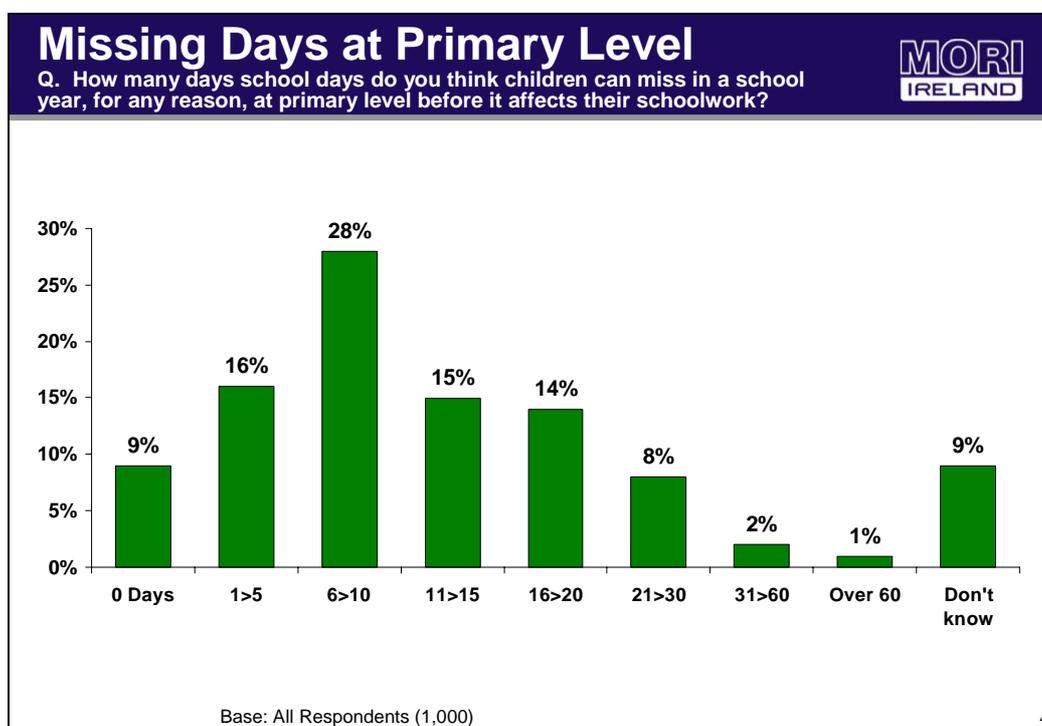


Figure I: Missing Days at Primary Level

1.2 Post-primary level

How many days school do you think children can miss in a school year, for any reason, at post-primary level before it affects their schoolwork?

According to our survey of 1,000 respondents, eighty-five percent (85%) indicated that if a child missed more than twenty schooldays it would affect their schoolwork. The remaining respondents comprised 9% who indicated that there was no effect from absences in excess of 20 days and 8% who responded that they did not know.

The 85% figure for the respondents who were concerned with absences of more than twenty days includes those respondents who believed that absences of much lower than the twenty days affected the children's schoolwork. Almost three-quarters (73%) of the respondents indicated that where a child missed more than fifteen schooldays it would affect their schoolwork. More than half (58%) indicated that where a child missed more than ten schooldays it would affect their schoolwork, while almost a third (32%) indicated that where a child missed more than five schooldays it would affect their schoolwork, and 10% believed that any absence affected schoolwork.

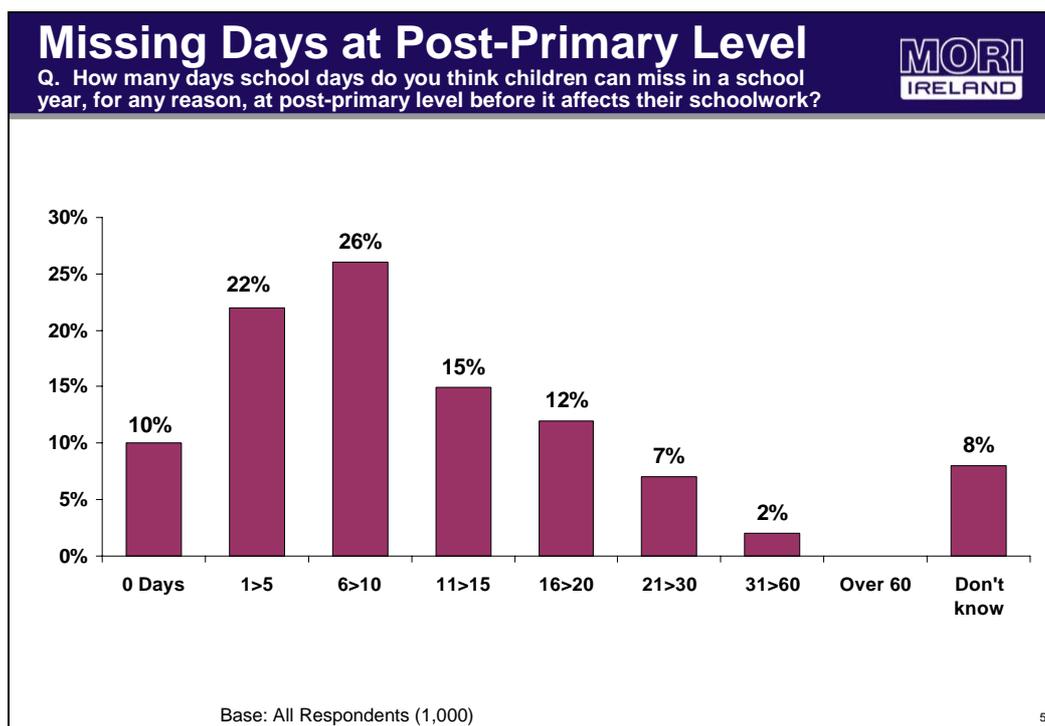


Figure 2: Missing Days at Post-Primary Level

1.3 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement that “it is more important that children at post-primary level do not miss school than children at primary level”.

Continuing the theme of the first two questions, respondents were then asked to indicate their level of agreement with the above statement. As illustrated in the figure below, forty-nine per cent (49.1%) of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that it is more important that children at post-primary level do not miss school than children at primary level. Thirty-six per cent (36.6%) of those surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

As the figure below shows, there are no significant differences between the opinion of the general public and that of respondents with school-going children.

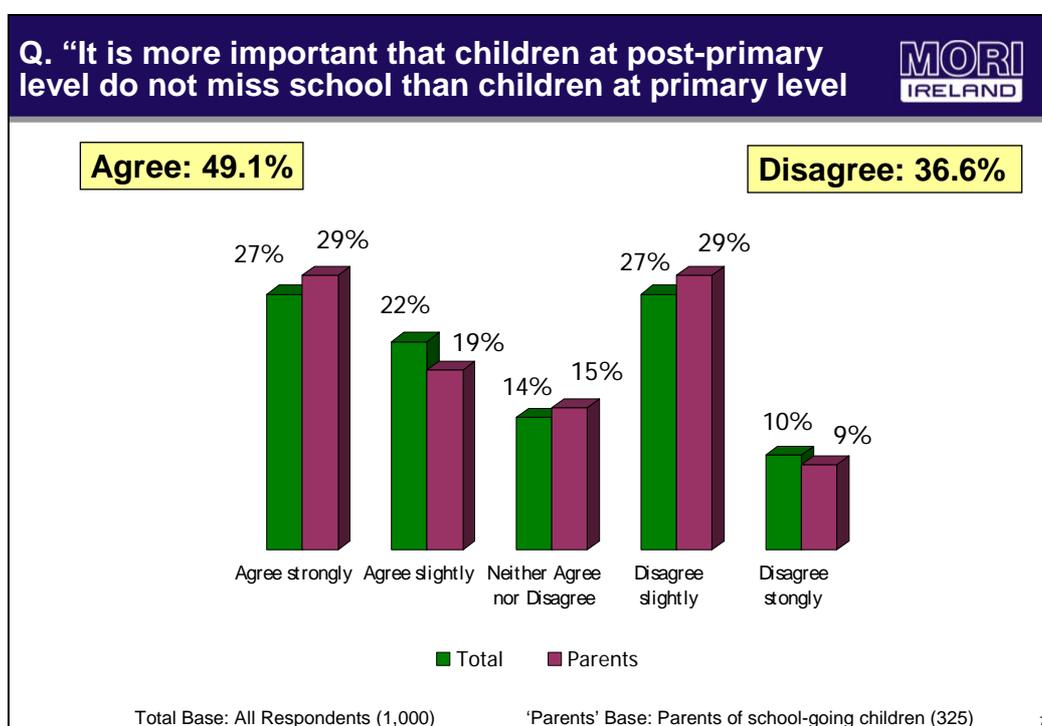


Figure 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement that “it is more important that children at post-primary level do not miss school than children at primary level”?

When we remove those respondents indicating neither agreement nor disagreement, the proportion agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement rises to fifty-seven per cent (57%). Respondents were then routed on the basis of their answer to the following questions (2.3a & 2.3b) to examine the reasons for their response further.

1.3a All those who agree with the above statement: “it is more important that children at post-primary level do not miss school than children at primary level” - Why do you say that?

Firstly, the 491 respondents who agreed that it is more important that children at post-primary level do not miss school than children at primary level were asked the reasons for their choice. When asked to explain their agreement with the above statement, seventy per cent (70%) of those who agreed indicated that they felt that education at post-primary level is more important. A further twenty-five per cent (25%) gave the reason that the standard of the material students are learning is more difficult. Also included in this response were those respondents who gave the reason that parents would be less able to help children with schoolwork.

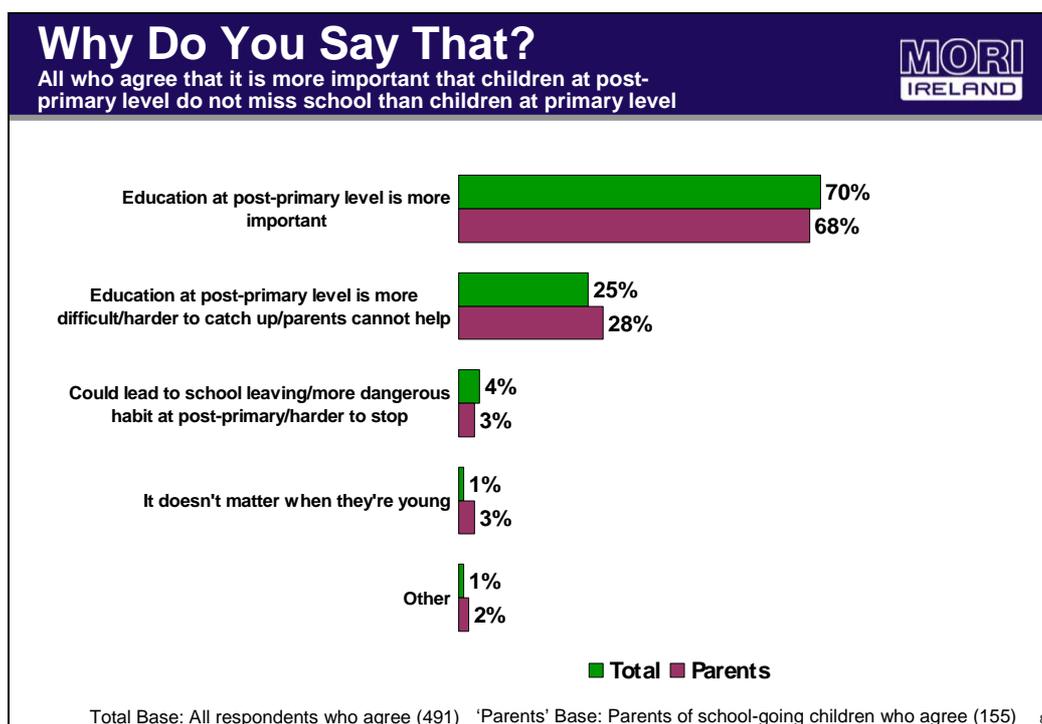


Figure 4: Why do you agree that “it is more important that children at post-primary level do not miss school than children at primary level”?

1.3b All those who disagree with the above statement: “it is more important that children at post-primary level do not miss school than children at primary level” - Why do you say that?

The 366 respondents who disagreed that it is more important that children at post-primary level do not miss school than children at primary level were also asked the reasons for their choice. Forty-nine per cent (49%) of those who disagreed with the above statement reported that they felt that education at primary level is more important. A further forty per cent (40%) reported that they felt that both levels were equally important, with five per cent (5%) citing the importance of the primary level in forming educational and attendance habits.

49% of parents, compared to 40% of the general public, felt that both levels were equally important. 42% of parents, compared to 49% of the general public, felt that education at primary level is more important.

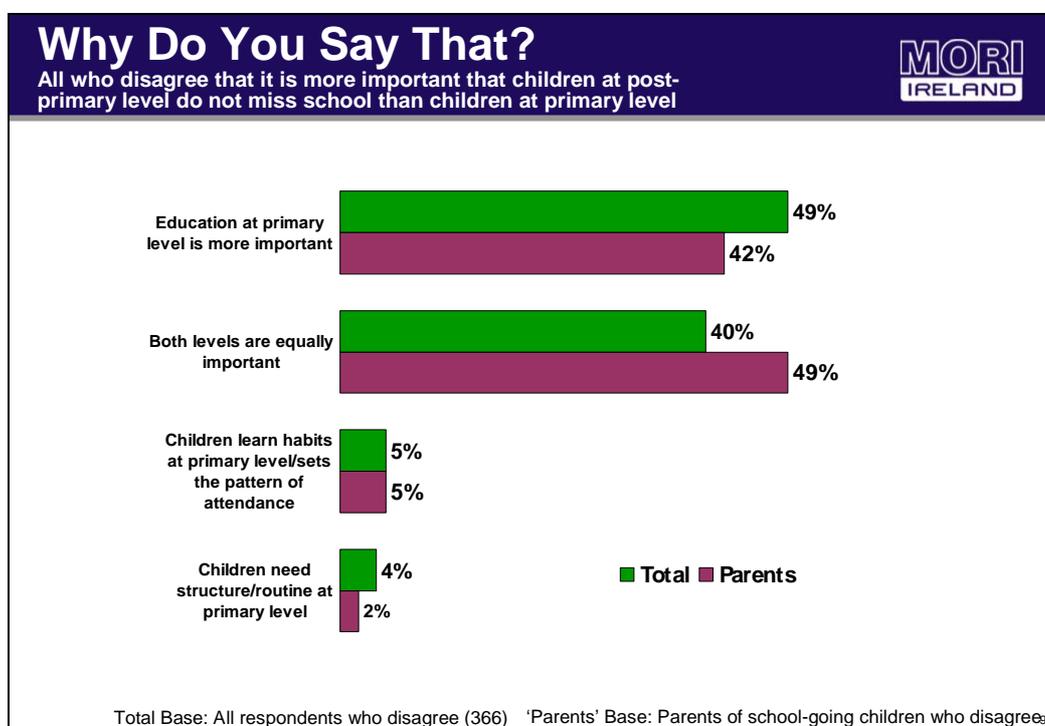


Figure 5: Why do you disagree that “it is more important that children at post-primary level do not miss school than children at primary level”?

1.4 Missing Days at School – Reviewing Results

While this survey indicates that, on average, the general public believes that children can miss more schooldays at primary level than at post-primary level before it affects their education, the difference is slight. In fact, there is broad agreement amongst the public that significant periods of absence at either primary or post-primary level will affect students’ schoolwork. 82% of the public believes that if children miss more than 20 days at primary school it will affect their schoolwork. 85% of the public believes that if children miss more than 20 days at post-primary school it will affect their schoolwork. 9% of people believe that any time missed from primary school will impact on schoolwork.

2. Most Important Aspects of School Life

This section summarises the results of questions relating to those aspects of school life respondents considered most important. Respondents were presented with four options:

- ✚ Personal Development;
- ✚ Formal Education;
- ✚ Social Development;
- ✚ Extra-Curricular Activities.

Respondents were asked to name the two most important aspects of school life, which were recorded as either 'first mention' or 'second mention'. Where relevant or appropriate, the opinions of the general public are compared with the opinions of parents of school-going children.

2.1 Most Important Aspects of School Life (First Mention)

According to our survey of the general public, the aspect of school life mentioned first by respondent is the *personal development* of the child. This was mentioned first by 54% of both the general public and parents. The next most frequently cited aspect of school life was *formal education*, cited by twenty-six per cent (26%) and twenty-eight per cent (28%) of the general public and parents, respectively.

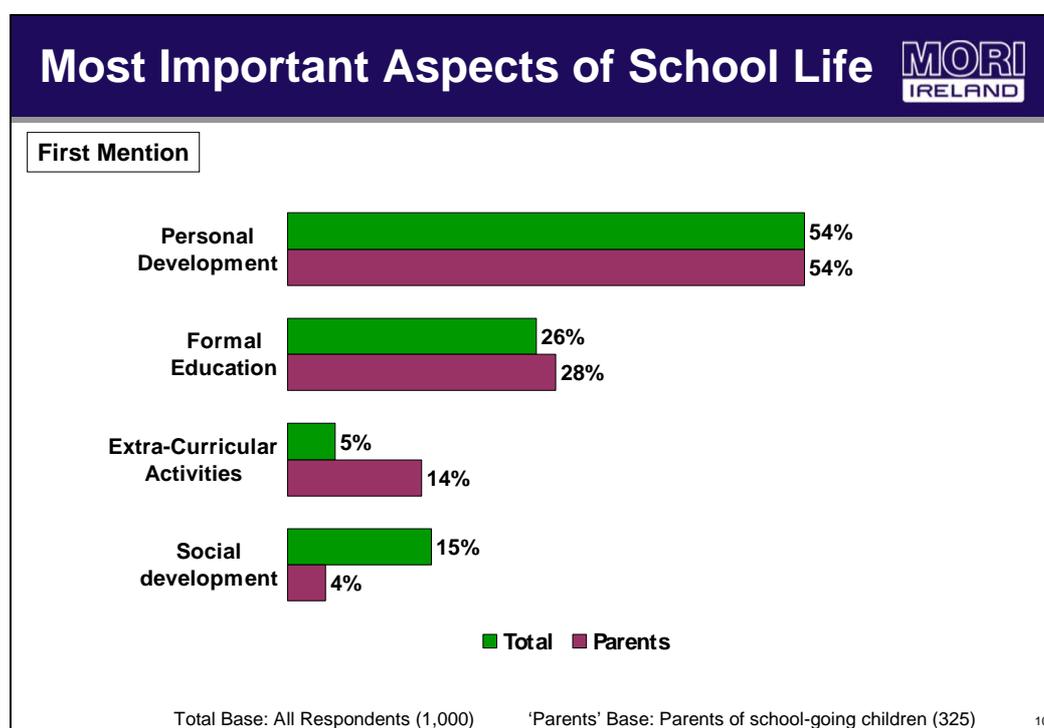


Figure 6: Most Important Aspects of School Life (First Mention)

2.2 Most Important Aspects of School Life (Second Mention)

The most frequent second mention is the *social development* of the child. This was mentioned second by forty-one per cent (41%) and thirty-eight per cent (38%) of the general public and parents, respectively. *Formal education* was cited second by twenty-nine per cent (29%) and thirty per cent (30%) of the general public and parents.

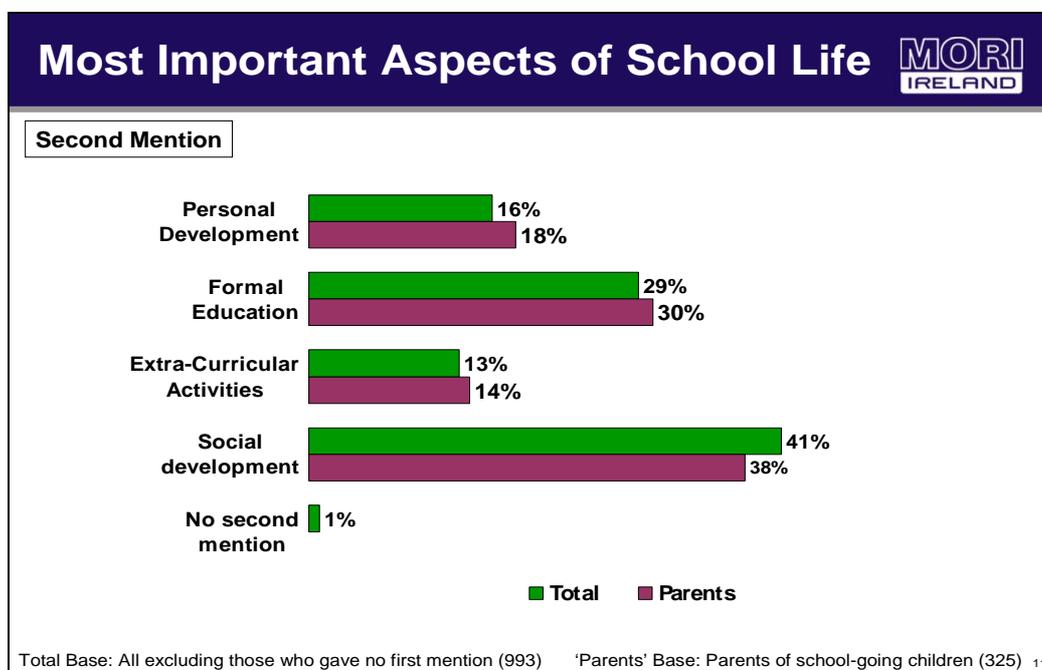


Figure 7: Most Important Aspects of School Life (Second Mention)

2.3 Most Important Aspects of School Life (Both Mentions)

In the view of respondents, the most important aspect of school life is the *personal development* of the child. This was mentioned by seventy per cent (70%) and seventy-two per cent (72%) of the general public and parents, respectively.

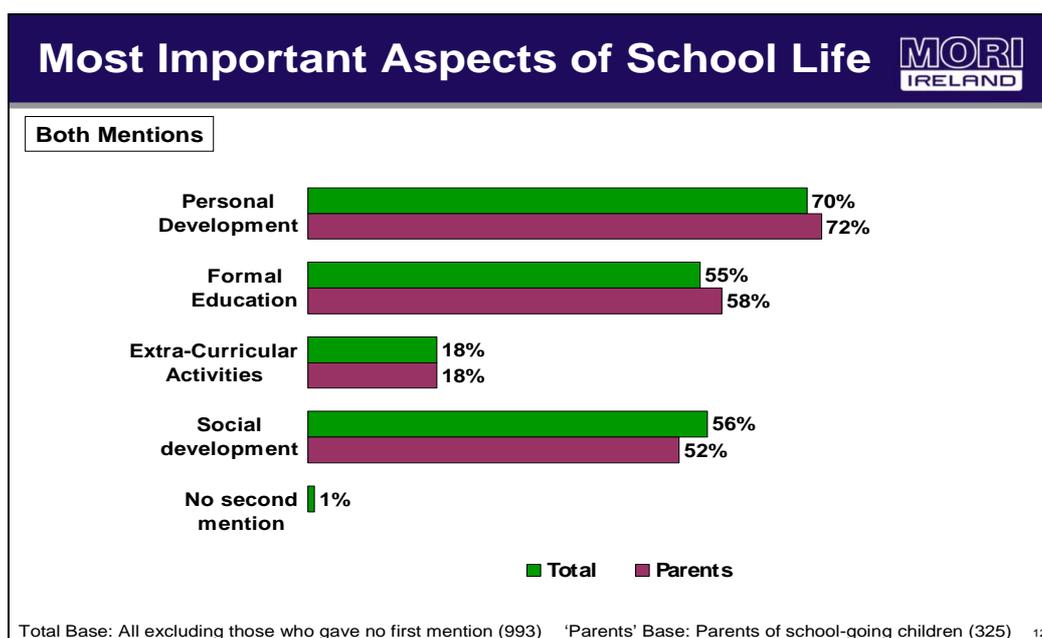


Figure 8: Most Important Aspects of School Life (Both Mentions)

3. Why Children Miss School

This section summarises the results of respondents' opinions of why some children miss a lot of days from school. The most popular reason offered was that *children's parents were not bothered*, which was given by fifty-two per cent (52%) and fifty-four per cent (54%) of the general public and parents, respectively. The second most popular reason given was *illness*, cited by thirty per cent (30%) of the general public and thirty-eight per cent (38%) of parents. The third most frequent response was that the children themselves *are not interested in school or are lazy*. Nineteen per cent (19%) of the general public and thirteen per cent (13%) of parents thought children's lack of interest was the cause.

The only other areas where there was a small difference between the views of the general public and parents was the influence of *problems with their teachers* and *holidays* on children missing school. Eight per cent (8%) of the general public believed that problems with teachers would make children miss a lot of school, compared to four per cent (4%) of parents. However, only four per cent (4%) of the general public believed holidays would cause children to miss a lot of school, compared to seven per cent (7%) of parents.

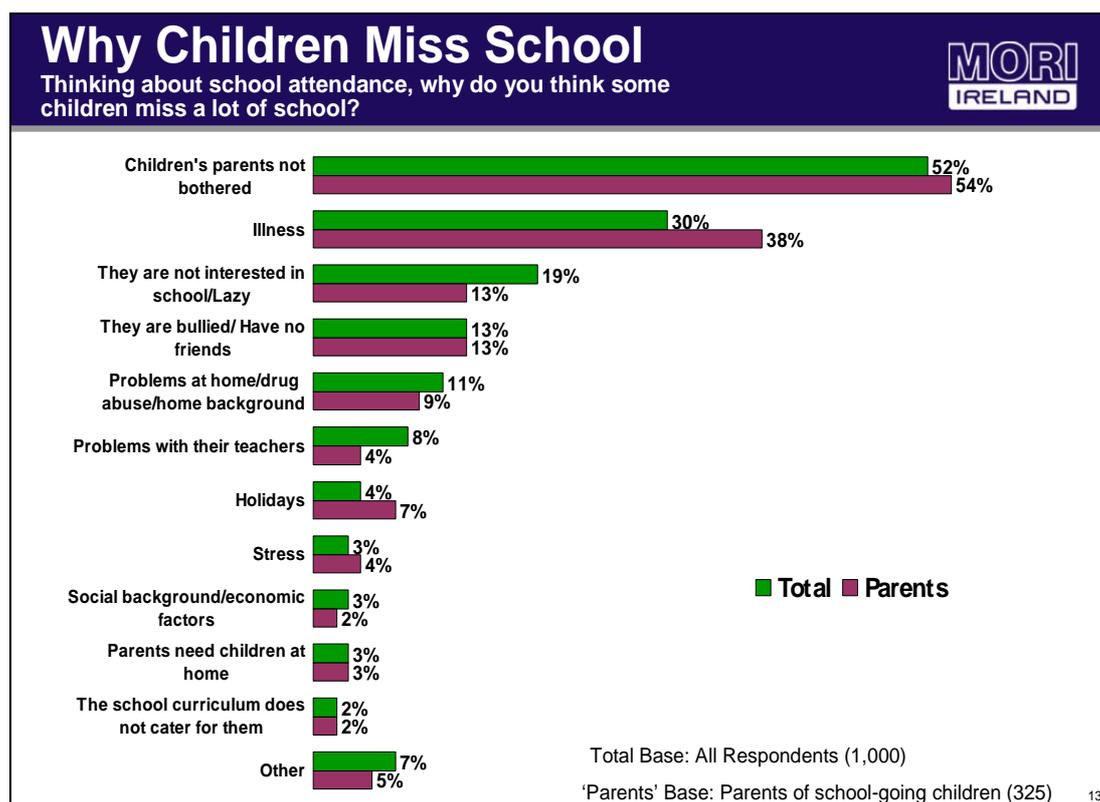


Figure 9: Why Children Miss School?

The survey results clearly indicate that most people apportion responsibility for non-attendance at school to parents, certainly to a far greater extent than they apportion responsibility to schools, teachers, social background or students themselves.

4. Respondents' Children

As illustrated in the chart below, a total of 325 survey respondents were parents with school-going children. All parents of school-going children were then asked if their children went to school willingly most mornings. Only two-and-a-half per cent (2.5%) said that their child did not go willingly to school.

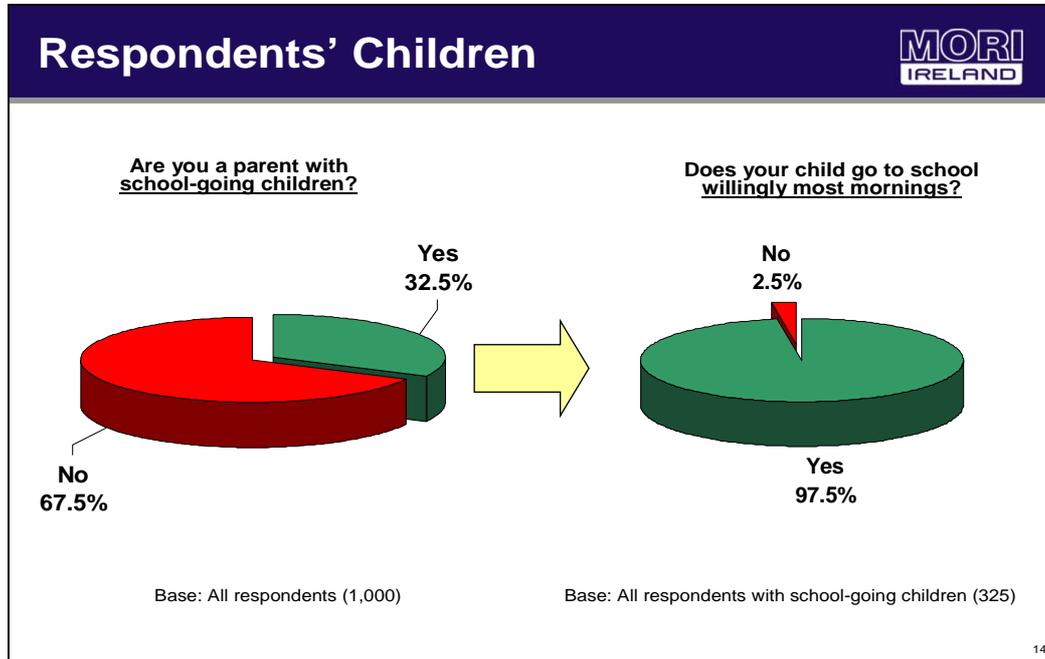


Figure 10: Respondents' Children and Attendance

5. Holidays during School Term

This section summarises the results of questions relating to the issue of taking children out of school for holiday during the school year. This question was only asked of parents with school-going children. Of the 325 parents of school-going children who participated in the survey, 84% do not take their children out of school for holidays during term time, while sixteen per cent (16%) said that they take their children on holiday during school term.

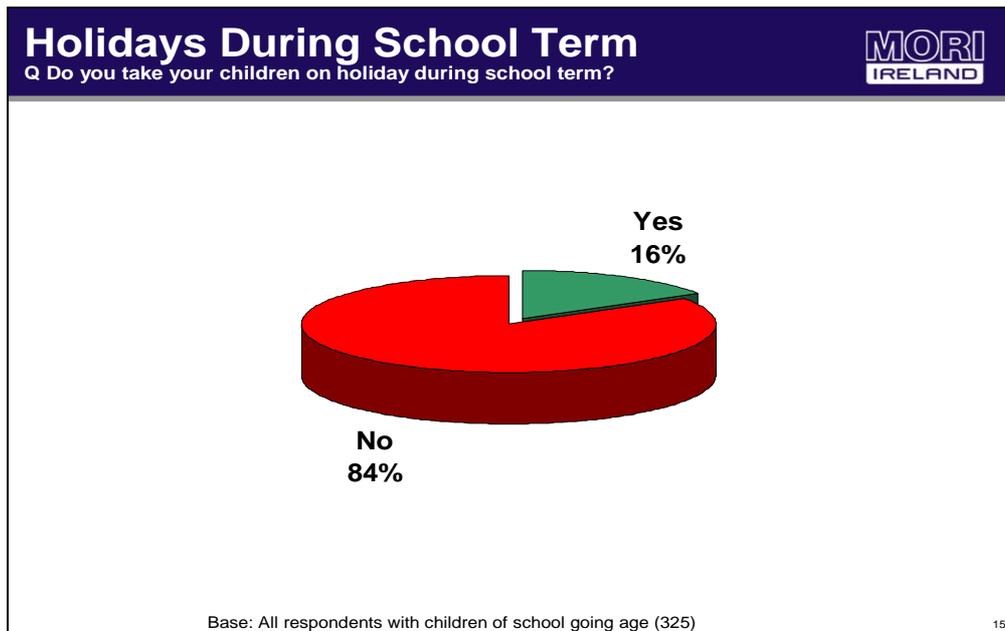


Figure 11: Holidays During School Term

5.1 Holidays during School Term (reasons why)

When respondents were asked why they took their children on holiday during school term, forty-six per cent (46%) gave the reason of *cheaper holidays/fares* and twenty-nine per cent (29%) gave the reason that *it suits the family*. A further seventeen per cent (17%) gave the reason that it was the *only time parent can get off* and twelve per cent (12%) said that *school was not that important*..

Note: Given the extremely small number of respondents (52) answering this question, extreme care should be taken in interpreting or extrapolating from these results.

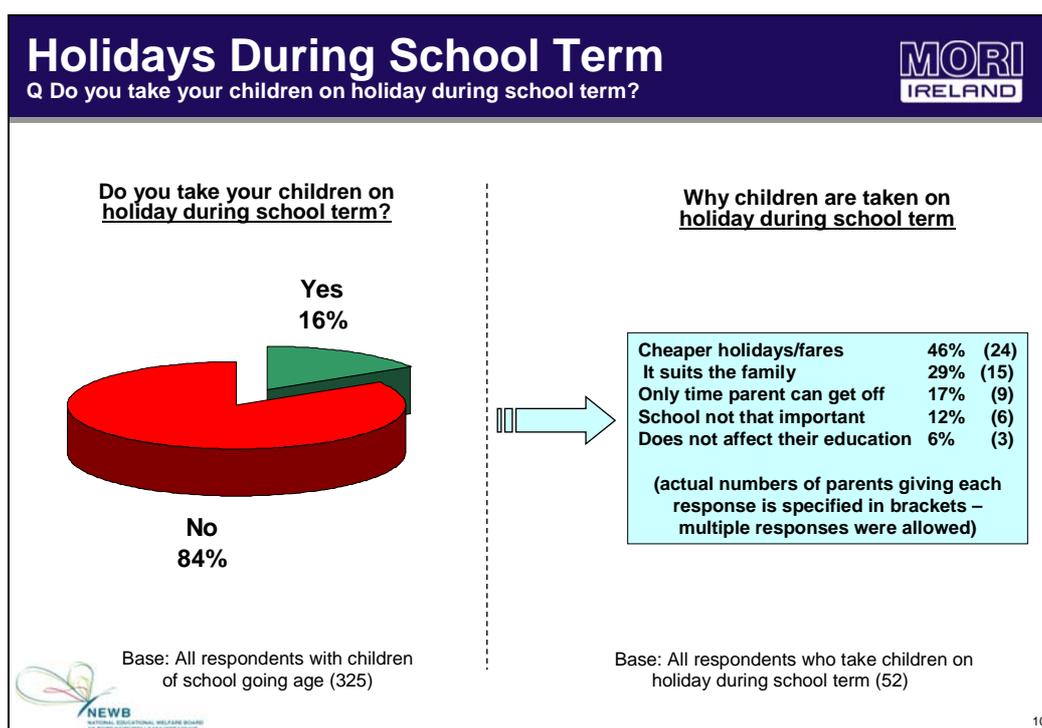


Figure 12: Reasons for Taking Holidays During School Term

5.2 Holidays during School Term (reasons why not?)

Respondents who did not take their children on holiday during school term were also asked to explain their decision. The two most popular answers were that *it would affect their education* and that *school is important*, cited by thirty-five per cent (35%) and thirty-four per cent (34%) of parents who did not take their children on holiday.

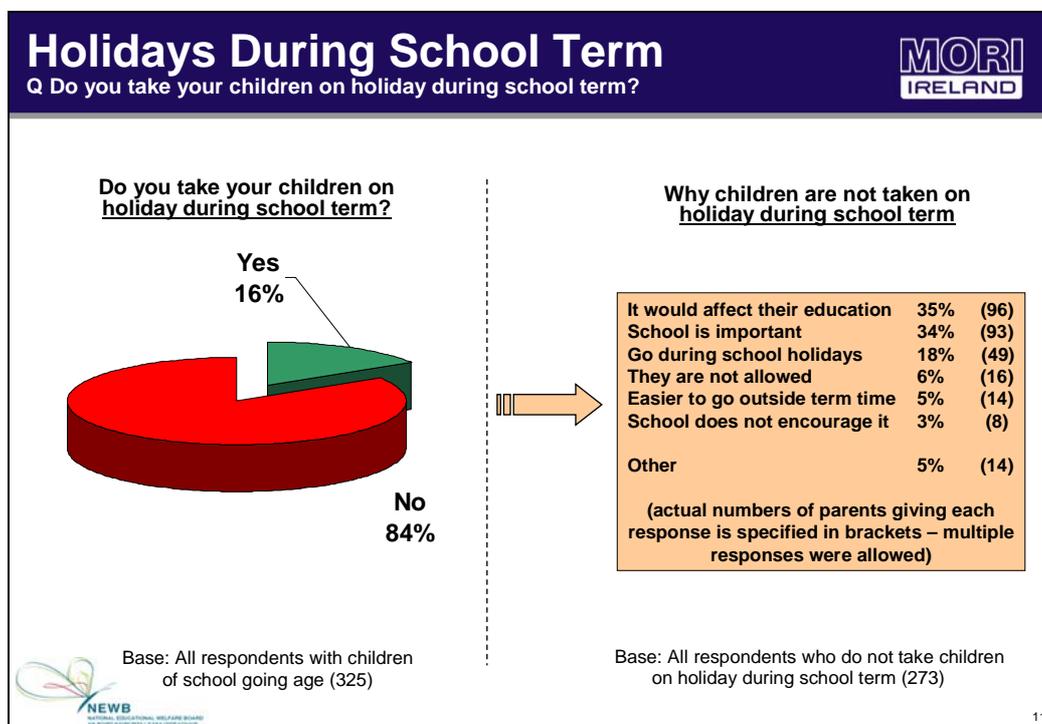


Figure 13: Reasons for Not Taking Holidays During School Term

6. Awareness of the National Educational Welfare Board

The final set of questions in the survey examined respondents' awareness of the National Educational Welfare Board and its functions. Thirty per cent (30%) of the general public had heard of the board, compared to forty-two per cent (42%) of parents. For a relatively young public body, this represents an encouraging level of awareness, although a figure of less than fifty per cent (50%) among parents indicates there is still a lot of work to be done with regard to communications.

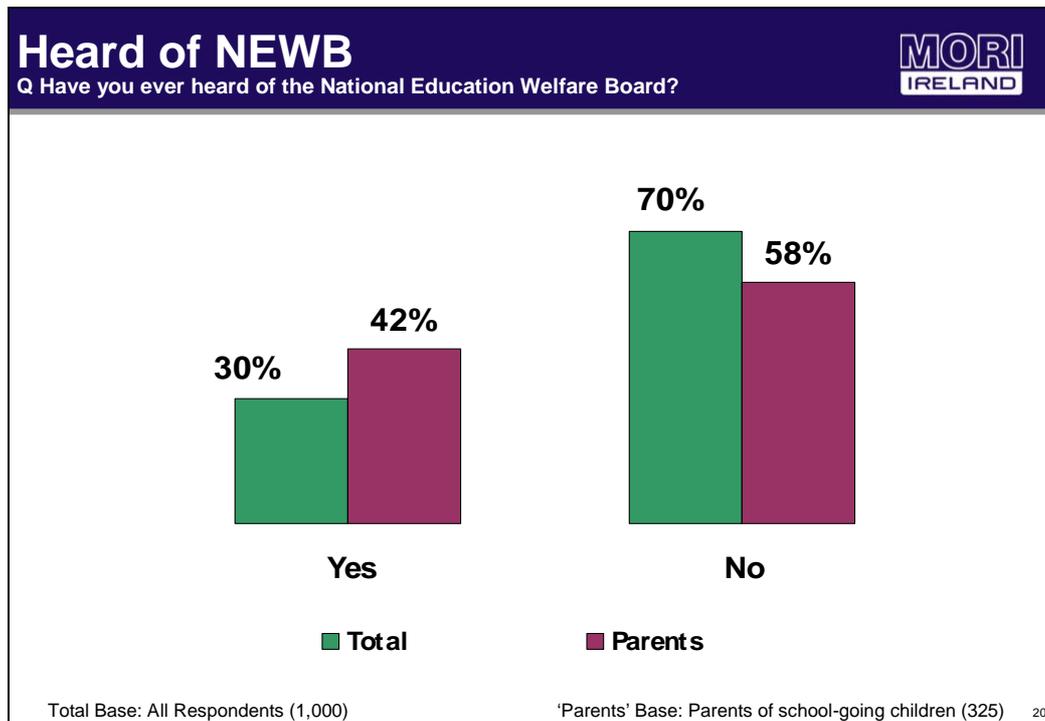


Figure 14: Awareness of NEWB

6.1 Awareness of the National Educational Welfare Board's Role

When asked what the role of the National Educational Welfare Board was, fifty per cent (50%) of those who had heard of the Board knew that it had a role in *monitoring attendance* and *ensuring that children received an education*. Sixty-one per cent (61%) of parents who had heard of the board gave the same answer. Forty-two per cent (42%) of those who had heard of the Board but were not parents of school-going children gave this answer also.

The second most popular answer was that the Board had a role with regard to *student welfare* and *protection of children*, given by nineteen per cent (19%) of non-parents and fourteen per cent (14%) of parents.

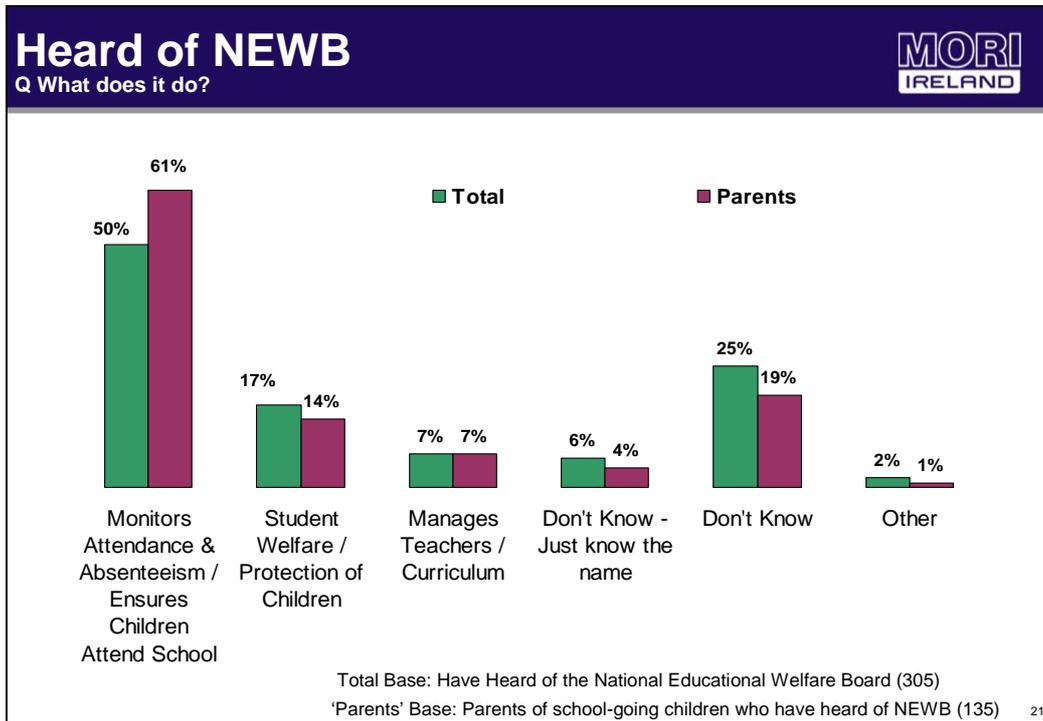


Figure 15: Awareness of NEWB's Role

Seven per cent (7%) of the general public and the same proportion of parents believe that NEWB is responsible for the management of teachers and/or the school curriculum. However, twenty-five per cent (25%) of respondents who had heard of the National Educational Welfare Board had no idea what its role was, with a further six per cent (6%) saying they just knew the name.

7. Conclusions – Issues for NEWB

Public awareness of the importance of school attendance

The findings are encouraging for NEWB. It is evident that most people are conscious of the impact of poor school attendance, and that the vast majority (82% in the case of primary school children) are aware that missing more than 20 days at school (the threshold beyond which schools must report absence to NEWB) impacts on school work. A majority believe that missing much lower levels of schooling (up to 10 days) impacts negatively on children's schoolwork. NEWB should capitalise on this awareness through public campaigns that promote school attendance and draw further attention to the negative impact of non-attendance.

Relative importance of attendance at primary and post-primary levels

Members of the public tend to regard missing school at primary level as slightly less significant than missing time at post-primary level. NEWB and other education partners need to find good ways of emphasising to parents that the foundation of educational success is laid down in primary school and that poor attendance at primary level can damage a child's educational outcomes in the long term.

Taking children on holidays

Although the proportion of parents in this survey taking children out of school for holidays is relatively small, it will be important for NEWB, together with school authorities to convey the message to all parents that missing school, for whatever reason, can have a lasting negative effect on learning. At the same time, there may be a need for NEWB to engage with the problem that many parents in less favourable economic circumstances or with inflexible work schedules can meet when they try to ensure that their family has a holiday together.

Understanding the factors affecting attendance

The factors that lead to high levels of non-attendance are complex. There is a strong link between levels of socio-economic disadvantage and levels of poor school attendance. Aspects of schooling can impact on attendance as well as family factors and children's motivation. The public does not readily understand this complexity.

Awareness of NEWB

The levels of awareness of NEWB and its role are encouraging, given that the organisation has been in place for a very short time. NEWB should nonetheless undertake a public awareness campaign to highlight the role and remit of the organisation, its services, and how its work differs from other agencies working in education and child welfare.

Technical Details

MORI Ireland interviewed 1,000 people by telephone, between 10th November and 6th December, 2005. Quotas were set by age, gender and region to ensure the survey was representative. It should be noted that a sample, not the entire population of the Republic of Ireland, has been interviewed. This means that all results are subject to sampling tolerances, and that not all differences are statistically significant (see below).

Where responses do not add up to 100%, this may be due to computer rounding or multiple responses. It is worth emphasising that the survey deals with the public's perceptions rather than facts.

Statistical Reliability

The respondents to the questionnaire are only a sample of the total "population", so we cannot be certain that the figures obtained are exactly those we would have obtained if everybody had been interviewed (the "true" values). However, we can predict the variation between the sample results and the "true" values from a knowledge of the size of the samples on which the results are based and the number of times that a particular answer is given. The confidence with which we can make this prediction is usually chosen to be 95%, that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the "true" value will fall within a specified range. The table below illustrates the predicted ranges for different sample sizes and percentage results at the 95% confidence interval, assuming a random sample.

	Sampling tolerances applicable to results at or near these percentages (based on 95% confidence level)		
	10/90%	30/70%	50%
Sample size	±%	±%	±%
100	6	9	10
300	3	5	6
500	3	4	4
750	2	3	4
1,000	2	3	3

For example, with the sample size of 1,000 used in this survey, where 30% give a particular answer, the chances are 19 in 20 that the “true” value (which would have been obtained if the whole population had been interviewed) will fall within the range of ± 3 percentage points from the sample result.

When results are compared between separate groups, different results may be obtained. The difference may be “real” or it may occur by chance because not everyone in the population has been interviewed. To test if the difference is a real one i.e. if it is “statistically significant”, we again have to know the size of the samples, the percentage giving a certain answer and the degree of confidence chosen. For example, if we are comparing two samples/bases of 200, assuming a 95% confidence interval, the difference between the two sample results must be greater than ten percentage points to be statistically significant, if the findings being compared are around 50%.