

NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL WELFARE BOARD

**ANNUAL REPORT TO THE MINISTER FOR EDUCATION &
SCIENCE FOR 2002**

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1. Introduction

The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 provides a comprehensive new framework for promoting regular school attendance and tackling the problems of absenteeism and early school leaving. All sections of the Act are now commenced.

The Act repeals the previous school attendance legislation and provides for the raising of the school leaving age to 16 years or the completion of three years' post primary education, whichever occurs later.

The Act provides for the establishment of the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) as the single national body with responsibility for encouraging and supporting regular school attendance. The Board is established under the auspices of the Minister of Education & Science.

Annual Report

The Annual Report for 2002 is prepared and presented to the Minister for Education & Science in accordance with Section 34 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

2. Mission

The mission of the National Educational Welfare Board is to ensure that each child attends a recognised school or otherwise receives an education and to take all necessary steps to achieve this objective and to advise Government on any related matters.

3. Chairperson's Report

The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 provides a new opportunity to realize the aspiration that all our young people will participate fully in and benefit from their education. Many would claim that this Act is a landmark in the history of Irish Government policy on education. The legislation is broad in its vision and comprehensive in its intent. Part of its vision is "to promote and foster in society and in particular in families, an appreciation of the benefits to be derived from education" (Section 10 (a)).

In June 2001, the then Minister for Education and Science, Dr Michael Woods, T.D., appointed the National Educational Welfare Board and charged us with the responsibility to put in place the staffing, structures and systems required for a new national educational welfare service.

As a designate Board we worked strenuously to advance a number of the provisions of the Act which would become law in July 2002. During these initial months the Department of Education and Science were generous in assisting our work, especially with the secondment of Mr. Paul Doyle (P.O.) to work with the Board. The appointment in August 2002 of an interim CEO, Mr. Eddie Ward, was a further milestone in advancing the establishment of the new service.

The provisions of the Act were commenced on 5 July 2002 and the Board assumed full statutory responsibilities for their implementation. The main objectives of the Act are:

1. To provide a comprehensive new framework for promoting regular school attendance;
2. To make legislative provision where serious difficulties;
3. To raise the school-leaving age to 16 years.
4. To attend to the educational welfare of all 16-18 year olds who have left formal schooling;
5. To ensure that those children who are educated outside the recognized school structure are receiving an adequate education.

Each of these objectives represents an onerous responsibility for the NEWB and its staff. However as we phase in this new service in all its dimensions we recognize the opportunity that is afforded us by this challenge.

Building the identity of this new organisation calls us to reflect and learn from the past. We need to garner the wisdom from the history and tradition that grew from the 1926 School Attendance Act. The welcome transfer of former school attendance officers as staff of this new service will ensure such a link is maintained.

The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 calls us to build a new culture of awareness among children, young people, families, schools and communities of the importance of full participation in education. The 'welfare' focus of this Act is indeed new and this organisation will seek to build an ethos of care into all its educational provisions.

Working closely with schools and all education partners, our desire will be to build on models of best practice. It is hoped that by promoting regular school attendance the NEWB will assist in tackling the problems of educational disadvantage and early school leaving. However, the Board is more than aware that the growing problem of absenteeism is not exclusively linked to areas marked by poverty and the problems related to social exclusion. A culture of carelessness in relation to children's attendance at school is emerging as a nationwide problem in all sectors of society and must be addressed.

As this is our first Annual Report, I wish to thank each person who has served as a Member of the Board. Few will ever know the time, and tireless effort that each Member devoted to the start-up phase of this organisation. The initial stage of building a new organisation is vital, as the spirit of this foundation will influence future growth and development. The dedication, generosity and commitment that each Member brought to the work of the Board augers well for a very positive and unique ethos which we hope will permeate this vital work in the years ahead. While we as Members come from a variety of different backgrounds we have worked together towards a common goal.

Finally I wish to thank our staff for all their excellent work. The Annual Report which follows gives a flavour of the many activities that have been undertaken in 2002.

4. Chief Executive Officer's Report

It gives me great pleasure to present the first Annual Report of the National Educational Welfare Board. I am very grateful to the members of the Board who have all worked tirelessly to see the new service develop. I am also grateful to the staff of the Board for their effort and commitment towards building the new service.

The main activities of the Board in 2002 concerned planning and negotiations relating to the development of the new service and the establishment of an administrative and management infrastructure to enable the Board to function and meet its statutory obligations.

Much of the work done in 2002 will only come to fruition in 2003 and subsequent years as the new service takes shape.

Planning the new service

In early 2002, the Board engaged an independent consultant (Staff Relations Services) to advise on the appropriate management, staffing and organisational structures necessary to develop and deliver the national educational welfare service as required under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. The consultant recommended (March 2002) a broad strategy for the development of the service as required by the legislation which was adopted by the Board. The study recommended that a total of 363 staff would be required to deliver the services envisaged by the Act. In arriving at this estimate, the consultant considered staffing norms in similar services in Northern Ireland the UK.

The Board accepted the consultant's recommendations and decided that it must develop a nationwide service accessible to schools; parents/guardians and others concerned with the welfare of young people. For this purpose, Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) would be appointed and deployed throughout the country to provide a welfare-focused service to support regular school attendance and discharge the Board's functions locally. The service would be developed in three phases and be structured on a regional basis.

The Board sought to develop the new service in accordance with the independent consultant's recommendations and there were extensive negotiations with the Department of Education & Science. Some unanticipated delays occurred in filling the Chief Executive Officer post which had the effect of slowing up the recruitment of other staff. It was hoped that some of these delays could be made up for in 2003 and a request for €13m budget was submitted. At the end of 2002, the negotiations concerning this allocation were very advanced.

The Board received confirmation of its budget allocation of €5.4m for 2003 on 13 February last.

Recruitment of management staff

The Chief Executive Officer post was advertised in 2001. The person who was offered the post in early 2002 declined it for personal reasons in April after having initially accepted it. Having considered the options available to it, the Board decided to make an interim appointment and sought assistance from the Department of Education & Science. Following an internal competition within the Department, Mr

Eddie Ward, Principal Officer was appointed to the post for a period of 1 year commencing on 19 August 2002.

Prior to this appointment, Mr Paul Doyle of the Department had acted as Executive Secretary to the Board and carried out administrative functions on its behalf.

Arrangements were made in the final three months of the year for the recruitment of ten management/administrative staff who will manage and direct the new service. The first senior staff took up duty in February 2003.

Transfer of School Attendance Officers

The 37 former school attendance officers who were employed by four local authorities became staff of the Board on 5th July 2002 in accordance with section 40 of the Act. There were extensive consultations with the staff concerning the new legislation and the duties of an Educational Welfare Officer. An offer was made to staff in August 2002 and this was followed by two meetings with staff under the auspices of the Labour Relations Commission which did not lead to a resolution of the issues. A revised offer was made in December 2002. Under the terms of this offer, any issues not resolved were to be referred to the Labour Court and this was accepted by staff. During this period, staff were authorised to carry out a range of duties similar to those carried out previously.

A one day training programme was provided on the law and general educational welfare issues.

Twenty five staff were appointed as Educational Welfare Officers in March 2003. A number of issues were referred to the Labour Court for adjudication and a ruling was issued in August 2003 which was accepted by staff in November.

Communications

A dialogue was opened with all the Education Partners and others involved in education. An introductory letter was prepared and issued to all schools in February 2003. A website was established to provide up to date information on the Board's activities. A logo was developed which gives the Board a unique identity.

Financial Report

The Board had a budget allocation of €4.3m in 2002. Expenditure for the year was €0.94m, yielding a saving of €3.36m. The slower than anticipated development of the Board's services, in particular, the recruitment of staff contributed to this saving.

Accounts and audit

The Board is required to keep accounts and submit them for audit to the Comptroller and Auditor General each year. However, due to the absence of management staff and systems in 2002, all payments by the Board were made and processed in the normal way by the Department of Education and Science. Accounts for the year have been prepared and will be audited by the Comptroller & Auditor General's Office shortly.

Board meetings

The Board meets monthly (with the exception of the month of August) and more often if required. Thirteen meetings were held in 2002.

A number of presentations were made to the Board during the year; Ms Sarah Craig on the NESF Early School Leavers Report; Ms Maugie Francis on Travellers in education and the implications for the Board; and Mr Harold Hislop on Guidelines on the Assessment of Education in places other than recognised schools.

Committees

The Board has established Committees on the following matters; Education, Staffing, Communications and Research which meet regularly or as required.

5. Legislation - Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

Commencement of Education (Welfare) Act 2000

Section 1 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 provides that the Act would come into operation within 2 years of its passing or on such day or days as may be appointed by the Minister for Education and Science.

One commencement order was made on 4th March 2002 which had the effect of commencing certain sections of the Act as follows:

- (a) Part 1 (other than section 8) of the Act in so far as that Part relates to the provisions specified in paragraphs (b) and (c) below
- (b) Section 9, subsections (1), (2), (3) and (8) of section 10, sections 11 to 13, sections 32 to 39 and section 41 of the Act and
- (c) The schedule of the Act.

The remaining sections came into effect on 5 July 2002 as provided for in the Act.

Functions of the Board

The general functions of the National Educational Welfare Board are outlined in section 10 of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, as follows:

The general functions of the Board shall be to ensure that each child attends a recognised school or otherwise receives a certain minimum education, and to assist in the formulation and implementation of policies and objectives of the Government for the time being concerning the education of children and, for those purposes, but without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing –

- (a) to promote and foster in society, and in particular in families, an appreciation of the benefits to be derived from education, in particular as respects the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, cultural and moral development of children, and of the social and economic advantages that flow therefrom
- (b) to promote and foster, in recognised schools, an environment that encourages children to attend school and participate fully in the life of the school

- (c) to conduct and commission research into the reasons for non-attendance on the part of students and into strategies and programmes designed to prevent it
- (d) to disseminate to recognised schools the findings of research conducted or commissioned pursuant to *paragraph (c)*, and to advise such schools on matters relating to the prevention of non-attendance, and the good conduct of students generally,
- (e) to assist recognised schools in so far as is practicable to meet their obligations under this Act,
- (f) to advise and assist children and the parents of children who exhibit problems relating to attendance at, and behaviour in, school
- (g) to support, monitor, and assess the effectiveness of, strategies and programmes aimed at preventing non-attendance in recognised schools,
- (h) to cooperate with such persons as the Board considers appropriate, and to coordinate the activities of the Board with the activities of those persons in so far as they relate to preventing non-attendance in recognised schools,
- (i) to carry out reviews of training and guidance given to teachers relating to matters of school attendance and the conduct of students, and to advise the Minister in relation thereto,
- (j) to advise the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as respects those aspects of the school curriculum that, in the opinion of the Board, are likely to have an effect on attendance levels at, or the extent of student participation in, school, and
- (k) to advise the Minister on any matter to which this Act relates.

6. Board Membership

The membership of the Board is set out in Section 2 of the Schedule to the Act. The Board has 12 ordinary members and a chairperson, all of whom are appointed by the Minister for Education & Science. The membership is drawn from bodies and organisations that have a special interest or expertise in school attendance and related issues.

Under the Act, a number of members are appointed following consultations by the Minister with the Minister for Health & Children, the Minister for Justice Equality & Law Reform, the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade & Employment and the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation.

The membership at 31 December 2002 was:

Dr Ann Louise Gilligan, Chairperson
Mr Eddie Ward, Chief Executive Officer
Ms Fionnuala Kilfeather, Parent Associations
Sr Eileen Randles, School Management Organisations
Mr Don McCluskey, Teacher Unions
Mr John Flanagan, Educational Welfare Officers
Mr Gearoid O Maoilmhichil, Voluntary Bodies
Ms Cate Hartigan*, Department of Health & Children
Ms Michele Shannon*, Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform
Ms Catherine Hazlett, Department of Social and Family Affairs
Mr Guss O Connell, Foras Aiseanna Saothair (FAS)
Dr Tony Crooks, Area Development Management Ltd (ADM)

There is one vacancy on the Board

* Mr Richard Dooley has since replaced Ms Hartigan.

* Mr Brendan O Callaghan has since replaced Ms Shannon.

The Board meets once a month and more often when required.