

**A Commentary on the Implementation of  
Giving Children an Even Break**

**Report to the  
Educational Disadvantage Committee**

**Susan Weir  
Educational Research Centre**

**Educational Research Centre, Dublin**

**2004**

# **A COMMENTARY ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GIVING CHILDREN AN EVEN BREAK**

In accordance with the terms of reference agreed with the committee, this section of the report contains “a brief commentary on core aspects of the implementation of *Giving Children an Even Break* (GCEB)”. The section is in two parts. The first part deals with the survey conducted by the Educational Research Centre (ERC) that was used to allocate resources in GCEB. The second part looks at the extent to which key aspects of GCEB as announced at its launch have been implemented.

## **PART 1: A SURVEY OF LEVELS OF DISADVANTAGE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

### **Background**

In December 1999, the Minister for Education and Science, Micheál Martin, announced a new package of measures designed to tackle educational disadvantage. The package, entitled the “New Deal: A Plan for Educational Opportunity<sup>1</sup>” involved spending £194 million over a three-year period on a variety of initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage, of which £29.5 million was to be allocated to addressing disadvantage at Primary Level. As a first step, the Minister proposed a comprehensive survey of all primary schools in the country to assess the level of disadvantage in each school.

In February 2000, the ERC was engaged to undertake a survey of socioeconomic disadvantage in all primary schools on behalf of the Department of Education and Science (DES).

### **The design of the survey instrument**

#### *Choice of format*

Previous analysis of data relating to levels of disadvantage furnished by schools in their applications to join the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme had confirmed a number of weaknesses in the procedure whereby information on socio-economic indicators is supplied by school principals (Weir, 1999). The use of socioeconomic indicators was

---

<sup>1</sup> “The New Deal” has also been referred to as “The New Programme”. The scheme under the “New Deal” by which schools received additional resources is known as “Giving Children an Even Break”.

found to be particularly problematic in the case of schools in rural settings. Therefore, an attempt was made to explore alternatives. For example, some discussions were held with officials of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs about whether information on the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance might be accessible in a form that would allow it to be aggregated to the level of the individual school. The discussion revealed that while such information was not accessible at the time, making it accessible in the future might not be impossible. The possibility of working with Community Welfare Officers on the compilation of information on schools was also briefly explored. Again this was found to be impractical, largely because of differences between Health Boards and between Community Welfare Officers within Health Board areas. Accordingly, it was decided that, as on previous occasions, levels of disadvantage would be assessed by means of a questionnaire to school principals.

#### *Selection of indicators*

Work began on the development of a questionnaire for schools in late February 2000. Some of this work was done at a series of meetings which were attended by members of the ERC staff and DES officials. One of the requirements of the survey was that questionnaires would have to be received by schools at least one week before the Easter holidays. This seriously limited the amount of development work that could be done on the questionnaire. However, it was decided to include poverty-related variables similar to those used in schools' applications to join *Breaking the Cycle* (e.g., unemployment, medical card possession, residence in local authority housing, lone-parent families). These variables had been found to be valid indicators of urban disadvantage in earlier analyses (Kellaghan, Weir, Morgan & Ó hUallacháin, 1995; Weir, 1999). In these analyses, residence in local authority housing, long-term unemployment, medical card possession, and lone-parent family status, were all found to be highly correlated with each other among urban applicants. In rural areas, however, local authority housing is not as relevant as in urban areas, while lone-parent status does not reflect disadvantage in the same way (i.e., local authority housing was found not to be closely related, and lone-parenthood was found to be unrelated to other socioeconomic variables in rural schools). These variables were, therefore, not used as indicators in rural schools, but an additional variable relating to low income

from farming was included<sup>2</sup>. It was decided that, in both urban and rural areas, socioeconomic information could be augmented by the inclusion of additional variables intended to tap other aspects of disadvantage (e.g., rates of early school leaving in the surveyed schools, levels of absenteeism, and percentages of pupils with very low levels of reading and numeracy). In addition, a range of items were included which were designed to provide data on school characteristics (e.g., the school's location, staffing level, and whether pupil intake included children from the Traveller community or from asylum-seeking / refugee families).

#### *Test-run of the questionnaire*

Despite the constrained time-scale for the development of the survey, it was possible to conduct a very small “try-out” of a preliminary version of the questionnaire. All of the principals who participated in the try-out recognised the importance of what was being attempted but all had serious reservations. One particularly significant reservation related to the socio-economic indicators (unemployment, medical card, local authority housing etc.). It was felt that schools did not readily have access to this kind of information and that it would be inappropriate for them to seek it out (i.e., it would represent an invasion of privacy). Questions about parental level of education were seen as very problematic. Two of the principals were very clear that they would not agree to answer these questions and one made the prediction that these questions might be the “final straw” for some principals who might simply refuse to co-operate. This posed a dilemma for the ERC and the DES because parental level of education had been found in Weir (1999) and elsewhere to be a useful indicator. In spite of this, and in the interests of maximising co-operation from schools, questions about parental education were not included in the final questionnaire.

Reservations were also expressed about the length of the questionnaire and about the amount of detail in some questions. The increasing demands on principals (in terms of paperwork) were mentioned frequently in feedback, and the difficulties of teaching principals in particular were highlighted. In light of these comments, a decision was made to shorten and simplify the questionnaire wherever possible. Thus, it was decided not to seek information that was available elsewhere. For example, information about enrolment by grade level and pupil-teacher ratios was not sought.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1 for a full list of variables and weights used to rank-order urban and rural schools.

Instead, the Statistics Section of the DES provided the ERC with the data from its annual returns for 1998/99. Similarly, information was supplied by the DES Special Education Section and by the officials responsible for the Books for Needy Pupils grant scheme. Finally, in relation to the length of the questionnaire, the fact that principals of large schools could base their answers to some of the more difficult questions on their senior classes rather than on the whole school was seen as helpful. Towards the end of March the DES made a decision that Special schools, as well as all “ordinary” National schools should be included in the survey, although all of the previous planning had been done on the basis that ordinary schools only would be included. By the time this decision was made, the final questionnaire and accompanying letter were being printed and it was not possible to include questions or instructions to take account of the particular circumstances of Special schools.

### **The administration of the survey to schools**

#### *Distribution of the survey*

On March 31<sup>st</sup> 2000, the DES issued a circular to all National schools and all Special schools announcing the new programme and informing schools of the forthcoming survey. By the 6<sup>th</sup> April, the ERC had posted surveys to all National ( $N=3,202$ ) and Special schools ( $N=107$ ) in the country. Schools were informed that they should return their completed surveys to the Educational Research Centre by April 20<sup>th</sup>. By the closing date, National schools had returned a total of 1,062 surveys (33.2% of the total sent out), and 36 surveys (33.6% of the total) had been returned from Special schools. It was then decided to write to schools that had not returned the survey by April 20<sup>th</sup> notifying them of an extension of the deadline until 5<sup>th</sup> May. However, surveys continued to arrive at the ERC throughout the summer of 2000, and the middle of July became the effective cut-off point, after which no further surveys could be processed. By then, the total number of completed surveys returned stood at 2,387 (or 74.5% of the population) in the case of National schools, and 62 (or 57.9%) in the case of Special schools.

#### *Feedback from principals*

An important feature of the survey was the opportunity that it afforded staff at the ERC to receive the views of principals on a variety of issues. There was a high volume of telephone calls when the survey first arrived in schools, mainly, though not

exclusively, to voice some kind of complaint (e.g., survey too long and too time-consuming, turnaround time too short, data not available, data too sensitive to get from pupils or parents, concern that other principals would not complete the survey honestly, or would inflate figures). There were also complaints, particularly from teaching principals, about their administrative workload in general, and about the number of forms and surveys to be completed at this time of year. There were also difficulties with some practical aspects of the administration of the survey (e.g., principals reported that the survey never arrived in the school in the first place, or arrived very late).

Between 10 and 20 percent of the principals of Special schools made contact with the ERC by telephone after the questionnaire was distributed. In some cases the principal simply wished to check whether they were included in the survey intentionally. In these cases and in many others, principals pointed out the inappropriateness of some of the questions (e.g., questions about early school leaving). When the circumstances surrounding the inclusion of Special schools were explained, most principals seemed pleased because apparently there has been some dissatisfaction in this sector about the fact that there has been no acknowledgement, to date, of differences between Special schools in terms of socio-economic characteristics of their students. A few principals expressed the view, however, that a separate survey of Special schools would have been preferable.

There were many (mainly telephone) queries from principals about individual survey items which they felt needed clarification. It must be assumed that there was also some level of confusion among respondents who did not contact the ERC, and they probably relied upon their judgement when interpreting the items. This, clearly, has implications for the comparability of responses. Also, several principals of schools of more than 160 pupils advised that the grade level upon which responses were to be based was not representative of their pupil intake as a whole. Principals who raised this issue were given the option of completing these items using the reference group *they* thought most appropriate, as well as completing the items based on senior grade levels (as requested in the instructions in the survey).

Many of those who phoned the ERC did not have a specific question or complaint. Instead, they simply wanted to discuss issues of disadvantage in general, and the

survey and its implications, in particular. Some of these were from schools that been unsuccessful in the past in obtaining disadvantaged status or inclusion in Breaking the Cycle and they were trying to discern any change in DES policy. On a few occasions, principals had phoned to make a particular point about the nature of disadvantage and/or the most appropriate way to respond to it. One interesting contrast, in this regard, is between principals who do and do not believe that the overall socio-economic context is important. One view appears to be that a disadvantaged child needs the same level of support whether he or she is the only such child in the school or a large majority of the students is disadvantaged. Another interesting issue arose in conversation with a small number of principals of schools in small towns who reported an increase in the proportion of their intake from disadvantaged backgrounds due to a tendency among more affluent families to send their children to rural schools outside the town.

#### *Submissions from schools*

A considerable number ( $N=168$ ) of additional individual submissions were returned with completed surveys. The breakdown, in terms of content of the submissions, was as follows: 25.0% contained requests for assistance (e.g., extra staff, such as remedial teachers) or sought consideration for disadvantaged status; 23.8% contained additional information to supplement survey responses (e.g., profiles of the local community or of the academic achievements of their pupils); 10.7% gave reasons why the survey was not fully completed, and cited inaccessibility of relevant information, the perception that some information was too sensitive or private to ask of parents, or that completing the survey was too time-consuming for teaching principals. A further 10.1% of submissions were from schools that had not completed all of the items because they were considered not relevant to their situation (e.g., Special schools), while 6.5% of submissions contained complaints about the length of time taken to complete the survey, or about the survey's content. The remainder were concerned with issues such as corrections to survey data, difficulties with individual survey items, and explanations for lateness.

#### *Late returns*

Between September 2000 and April 2001, the ERC received 44 late questionnaires. These schools were not included in the Giving Children an Even Break since the processing of questionnaires was completed on August 31, 2000.

## **Reporting of results**

As already noted, due to differences between schools in their size and location, it was not possible to use the same variables to rank order schools in urban and rural areas. For the purpose of the survey, schools located in areas with populations of fewer than 1,500 people were categorised as ‘rural’ (about 1,500 schools), while schools in areas where the population numbered 1,500 or more were categorised as ‘urban/town’ (about 800 schools). Results were, therefore, produced separately for urban and rural schools.

The ERC furnished the DES with a list of urban schools ranked from the highest (most disadvantaged) to the lowest on the basis of their total points (up to a maximum of 800 points as outlined in Appendix 1). The DES used this list to allocate additional funding and, where it was necessary to provide additional teachers to reduce the size of junior classes to 20:1, personnel to schools with the greatest concentrations of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Rural schools that returned questionnaires were similarly ranked on the basis of total points accrued on the appropriate indicators (Appendix 1). The two ranked lists (urban and rural) supplied by the ERC to the DES were accompanied by letters that outlined the main features of the survey and contained observations on some of the issues that had arisen. The letters are reproduced in Appendix 2 and 3 respectively. In addition to producing a list of rural schools, the DES asked the ERC to produce a map on which was shown the location of (a) the top 350 ranked rural schools, (b) schools already participating in the rural dimension of *Breaking the Cycle* (c) schools that had not yet availed of their allocation of a part-time Home/School /Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme coordinator, and (d) nine schools whose survey results had incorrectly indicated that the school was in an urban setting. The mapping exercise was necessary because, rather than allocating extra staff to individual rural schools, it was planned to allocate shared teachers to clusters of four or five proximal schools following the model of the rural dimension of *Breaking the Cycle*. It was necessary to know the location of rural *Breaking the Cycle* schools in case creating new clusters under GCEB involved some reorganisation of the former.



The task of mapping these schools was completed with the help of the DES Inspectors of Schools in early September. Following a request from the DES, the ERC also made proposals for dividing rural schools into clusters on a geographic basis.

#### *The re-survey in 2001*

After the New Programme was announced in January 2001, several schools contacted the ERC and/or the DES and offered various explanations for their school's non-participation in the survey in 2000. A small proportion stated that a questionnaire had never been received from the ERC, while others insisted that they had returned a questionnaire, but no record of it could be found in the ERC. Some principals indicated that they had taken over as principal since the survey was carried out in 2000 and that they now wished to complete a questionnaire on behalf of the school. Others stated that the questionnaire had not been returned due to the principal's absence or illness.

In February 2001, following consideration of submissions received, the DES decided that any school that made a case concerning the failure to return a questionnaire in 2000 should be given a second chance to complete a questionnaire. It was also decided that a further opportunity to participate in the survey should be given to schools that did not return a questionnaire but were designated as disadvantaged or were participating in the Breaking the Cycle initiative, even if these schools had not made a submission. It was decided that late returns would be dealt with in the same way as schools that participated in the re-survey. On this basis, the ERC obtained data (using a modified version of the original questionnaire) from 133 schools between March and June 2001. As a result of both the original and second round surveys (to which the 44 late questionnaires from the first round were added), data were returned from 80% of ordinary National schools in total.

#### **The aftermath of the survey and the appeals process**

Following the announcement of Giving Children an Even Break, a number of schools expressed concern about the outcome of the survey in respect of their schools. These schools were invited to make a submission outlining their circumstances to the DES and the ERC was asked to review the submissions and report to the DES.

Submissions were received from 91 schools which were forwarded to the ERC where a process was carried out in which, in the case of each submission, the questionnaire

from the school was located and processed manually in order to identify any possible data-entry or data-processing errors. As each appeal was handled on a case-by-case basis, the process also involved direct contact with almost all of the schools that had made submissions. In addition to the categories of cases below, several complaints about proposed clustering arrangements were received from rural schools. The source of some schools' dissatisfaction was that proposed clusters disrupted existing Breaking the Cycle clusters which were considered by those involved to be working well, and in some cases, the submission contained a proposal for an alternative cluster<sup>3</sup>.

#### *The nature of appeals from schools*

The following represent the different categories of submission received:

1. *Associated schools.* Some schools appealed their allocation on the basis that they had not received comparable resources as other schools serving the same families. Given the complexities of these submissions, it was considered important that the DES should verify, through its Inspectorate, that the schools named in the submission were, in fact associated (i.e., on the same campus; serving the same families). Where this was verified, the school with the highest score was identified and the accuracy of the data supplied was checked by members of the Inspectorate (e.g., checks were done on the lists that were used by the school to compile the statistics for the key questions on the questionnaire).

2. *Location anomalies.* Before any submissions were received, it became clear that some schools in rural areas displayed urban characteristics and that their (rural) points total might underestimate their level of disadvantage. Not surprisingly, therefore, submissions were received that were effectively requests to be reclassified as urban schools. This matter was raised with the DES which indicated that reclassification could undermine the implementation of the New Programme and would not be countenanced in the short term. However, the ERC recommended that the issue of anomalies relating to location needed to be revisited in the context of any evaluation of the scheme and in the context of future efforts to target resources at school level.

---

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that this was flagged as a potential problem by the ERC in a letter to the DES which accompanied the final list of rank-ordered rural schools (see letter relating to the rural list in Appendix 3).

3. *Cohort anomalies.* Some schools made a very convincing case for the position that the socioeconomic profile of their intake was changing and that, therefore, the use of data from the most senior grades in the survey was inappropriate. These schools provided data on junior cohorts that supported their contention, and these data were used to calculate points totals that probably reflected the true level of disadvantage more accurately than the totals based on the whole school or on senior classes. Investigations of the individual circumstances of these schools were undertaken by members of the DES Inspectorate prior to finalising their resource allocation.

4. *Schools that submitted new data relating to key questions* (i.e., questions involved in the computation of a school's points total). As already noted, some schools skipped key questions and this could have resulted in an underestimate of their level of disadvantage. It was agreed that the ERC should ask any school that had made a submission and had skipped important questions on the original questionnaire to supply the missing information. This was subsequently done and the points totals of schools that submitted data on previously missing variables were amended accordingly. In addition, a number of schools sought to have their answers to key questions revised. As it seemed reasonable to treat schools that revised their answers to key questions and those that skipped key questions in the same way, points totals for the former schools were also amended.

5. *Others.* This category relates to schools that sought to have their allocation of resources under the New Programme increased but did not provide any new data relating to the key questions.

### **Some comments on the appeals process and second round survey**

As a proportion of the total respondents ( $N=2,564$ ), the number of appeals ( $N=191$ ) was relatively small (about 7%). Of these, many could be fairly easily dismissed because the schools involved provided no basis for revising their original survey points total. Others were revised on the basis that they provided previously missing data on one or more key variables, or because they provided revised data on these variables. Due to a policy decision taken by the DES, schools that claimed a location anomaly (i.e., that they had been wrongly classified as rural) did not have their points totals revised. The remaining categories of appeals (associated schools and cohort

anomalies), although they represented quite a small proportion of the total, required a considerable amount of investigation and follow-up work in order to establish whether or not there were grounds for revising their points totals.

It should be noted that there are some features of the appeals process which are unsatisfactory, the first of which is that the process lacked transparency. Although this is unfortunate, it was unavoidable, as the appeals system evolved as a means of accommodating schools which might otherwise have been treated unfairly. However, the result was that schools that contacted the ERC about their allocation had an advantage over schools that did not contest their allocations, in that the former cases were re-examined. Similarly, schools that contacted the ERC after the closing date and asked to complete a survey were allowed to participate in the second round survey while other non-respondents were not. Furthermore, schools that participated in the second round survey may have been more aware of what was at stake in responding to the survey. Therefore, they may have answered the items differently, or at least made greater efforts to ensure that all key items were completed.

The assessment of levels of disadvantage in schools that claimed that they were experiencing cohort anomalies (i.e., that the proportion of their intake from disadvantaged backgrounds is on the increase) presents a particular problem. Clearly, if levels of disadvantage are assessed on a once-off basis, but are used to dictate resource allocation over a longer period (e.g., three years, as was the case in GCEB), schools with changing profiles have a strong case for being allowed to update their data at regular intervals. Indeed, some second round schools argued that this was occurring in their schools and were permitted to submit data for 2000/2001 rather than for 1999/2000. In recognition of the potential for this to be a problem for at least some schools, it is suggested that schools' intake is tracked on a regular basis to identify those with significantly changing socioeconomic profiles. As there is currently no alternative means of doing so (such as a database containing information on the number of pupils whose families have medical cards), it is suggested that data from the Books for Needy Pupils grant scheme, which is collected on an annual basis from almost all National schools, could be used as an interim measure. This information could be viewed as supplementary to other periodic surveys of levels of disadvantage.

### **Some comments on the survey methodology**

Several methodological issues concerning the procedures used to assess levels of disadvantage, particularly given that the allocation of resources depended on this assessment, deserve comment. It should be noted that many of the difficulties relate to the fact that data were collected via a survey to principals, and these difficulties would be overcome if data were gathered by another means (e.g., centrally).

#### *Missing data on individual items.*

Missing data posed a problem for the assignment of overall rankings to schools on the basis of their level of disadvantage. Although data were missing on many items, it was a particular problem in relation to the key items that asked for the numbers and percentages of pupils satisfying various poverty criteria (Qs 20-29) which were used to compute an overall index of disadvantage for each school. While schools that appealed their allocations were asked to submit data on missing items, schools that did not appeal (representing over 90% of all respondents) were not.

#### *Misunderstanding / misinterpretation of items*

There was evidence of confusion among some principals in their completion of items which involved deriving percentages from numbers. Sometimes principals only included percentages, or sometimes, only numbers. In other cases, the percentages given were not consistent with the numbers upon which they were said to be based. The item concerning the total number of pupils upon which responses to key questions were based was a source of much confusion among respondents.

#### *Over-reporting on indicators of disadvantage*

Even allowing for the possibility that the 20 percent of schools that did not return the survey are the least disadvantaged in the country, the levels of unemployment, medical card possession and local authority housing reported by schools in the present survey seem far higher than the actual levels of these characteristics in the population as indicated by other sources (e.g., the Census of Population, Labour Force Surveys and independent research studies including some at the ERC). More seriously perhaps, initial analysis of the data from the survey revealed very large differences between schools in cities and schools in other locations in terms of reported levels of disadvantage.

*The validity of data provided by principals*

In light of previous experience, it was suggested to the DES that before allocating resources to individual schools, a sample of returns should be examined to check the validity of the information provided in the survey. (This an important point considering that there is evidence of over-reporting, as outlined above). The ERC proposed that one means of verifying schools' returns was via consultation with members of the Inspectorate, which would ensure that reported levels of disadvantage reflected accurately the situation in schools with which Inspectors had a high degree of familiarity. In a letter from the DES which preceded the administration of the survey, schools were informed that a sample of responses would be checked for accuracy. However, it was felt subsequently that, due to their workloads, Inspectors did not have the resources to conduct more than a brief examination of schools at the high end of the rank-order that had not previously been designated as disadvantaged. Along with verifying responses in cases of appeals from schools that claimed an association with other schools, no other system of checking responses was put in place.

## **PART 2: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GIVING CHILDREN AN EVEN BREAK**

No formal evaluation of Giving Children an Even Break has been conducted. However, an attempt is made here to examine the distribution of resources under the scheme, and to assess the extent to which the scheme as originally described was actually implemented. This will be done with reference to the official description of Giving Children an Even Break published on the DES website (Appendix 4). Among other things, the key features and underlying principles of the scheme will be examined and some assessment of the extent to which they have been implemented will be made.

### **The allocation of additional staff to urban schools**

*Do junior classes in schools in urban areas have 20 pupils or less in all cases deemed eligible for such class sizes?*

Although virtually all schools that completed a survey received a financial allocation of some sort (to qualify, schools required a minimum of only one pupil with characteristics associated with disadvantage), a key provision of the scheme in urban areas was the allocation of additional teaching posts to reduce the size of junior classes to a maximum of 20:1. The top-scoring 238 schools (about one quarter of all urban schools) were eligible for posts, and the survey points total achieved by the 238<sup>th</sup> school on the list became the “post-bar”.

However, where schools had Traveller or special needs pupils enrolled, these pupils were not reckonable for the allocation of GCEB posts on the basis that a resource had already been provided for them. As posts were allocated based on the remaining valid enrolment, this could bring classes over the prescribed maximum class size (20:1 or 27:1). There is no figure from the DES quantifying the number of schools in this category. It should be noted that, during the appeals process, it was pointed out by a number of schools that the application of these rules could interfere with the integration of Travellers into mainstream classrooms. All schools above the post-bar with no Traveller or special needs children had staffing allocated to them in order to implement class sizes of 20:1 in all junior classes (i.e., junior infants through to 2<sup>nd</sup> class) and 27:1 in senior classes (3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> inclusive). Similarly, Breaking the Cycle schools retained a 15:1 ratio in junior and a 27:1 ratio in senior classes.

Only about half of schools above the post-bar that were not already in Breaking the Cycle ( $N=208$ ) received additional posts under the scheme. There are several reasons for this. First, some high-scoring schools were senior schools, and as the initiative involved more substantial reductions in class size at junior level, fewer senior schools would have benefited from additional posts. Second, the very small enrolments of some schools meant that they did not require extra staff to implement the small class sizes. Third, many designated schools above the post-bar already had favourable pupil-teacher ratios which allowed them to achieve the maximum class sizes using existing resources. This conclusion is based on the fact that only half of all designated schools above the post-bar received posts compared with over three-quarters of non-designated schools. Furthermore, schools that were not designated previously tended to receive greater numbers of posts than their already designated counterparts: Almost half of the 31 non-designated schools that received posts were allocated three or more posts, whereas over four-fifths of previously designated schools received one or two posts. These findings appear to reflect previous DES policy of discriminating positively towards schools serving pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

*How many new teachers were required to achieve the desired class sizes and what was the total cost?*

In the first year of the scheme (2000/2001), 161 teachers were required to implement the small class sizes (Table 1), and by 2003/2004, the number had risen to 249. When these posts are added to those already required under Breaking the Cycle, the total number of posts required to reduce class sizes is 323. There was a substantial increase in the number of posts under GCEB between 2001/2002 and 2002/2003. This appears to have occurred for a number of reasons, such as a policy decision to reduce senior class sizes to a maximum of 27:1 (previously 29:1) in schools participating in GCEB, the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme, and in Breaking the Cycle. However, although schools in GCEB received additional posts as a result, the posts were not used to reduce the size of junior classes. It is unclear why this decision was taken. An alternative option for the DES would have been to use the available posts to reduce the size of junior classes in additional schools further down the list (i.e., reduce the post-bar), or to implement further reductions in class size among participating schools (e.g., decrease them from 20:1 to 15:1). Also, the implementation of the



outcome of the appeals process resulted in further schools gaining posts, and in a smaller number of cases, schools losing posts. Finally, an administrative error at the DES involving the inclusion of Traveller/Special needs pupils in calculating the required number of posts in 2003/2004 resulted in additional posts being allocated to some schools.

Table 1. Number of posts allocated to schools under Giving Children an Even Break and Breaking the Cycle since 2000/2001 (source: Department of Education and Science).

School Year	Number of Teachers under Giving Children an Even Break	Number of Teachers under Breaking The Cycle	Total number of teachers	Cost of Posts (Notional figure €40,000 per post)
2000/2001	<b>161</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>€ 8,960,000</b>
2001/2002	<b>178</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>€ 9,480,000</b>
2002/2003	<b>242</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>311</b>	<b>€ 12,440,000</b>
2003/2004	<b>249</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>323</b>	<b>€ 12,920,000</b>

### **The allocation of additional staff to rural schools**

As described earlier, high-scoring rural schools were eligible for additional staffing in the form of shared co-ordinators serving clusters of schools (normally 5 schools per cluster). For purposes of grouping schools, existing Breaking the Cycle clusters were included in the pool of schools (466 schools in total) used for identifying potential clusters. In cases where a school was deemed to be unclusterable due to its lack of proximity to other high-scoring schools, it was decided to compensate for this by allocating appropriate financial support to the school. As with other allocations of finance in GCEB, there are no data on how the finances were used.

*How many rural coordinators have been appointed and what was the total cost of posts and unclusterable grants?*

The number of posts sanctioned under GCEB, and the number of occupied posts since 2001 are shown in Table 2. (Figures for 2000/2001, the first year, are not given as the scheme in rural schools took a considerable period of time to implement and overlapped with the rural dimension of Breaking the Cycle). Of the 79 posts that were sanctioned, 24 (30%) were not filled in 2003/2004.

Table 2. Number of rural co-ordinators appointed\* under Giving Children an Even Break\* since 2001/2002 (source: Department of Education and Science).

School Year	Number of co-ordinators*	Cost of Posts (Notional figure €40,000 per post)	Unclusterable Grant @ €5,396.39 per unclusterable school	Total Posts and unclusterable grants
2001/2002	<b>24 /79</b>	<b>€ 960,000</b>	<b>€ 431,711</b>	<b>€ 1,391,711</b>
2002/2003	<b>39 /79</b>	<b>€ 1,560,000</b>	<b>€ 366,955</b>	<b>€ 1,926,955</b>
2003/2004	<b>55 /79</b>	<b>€ 2,200,000</b>	<b>€ 377,747</b>	<b>€ 2,577,747</b>

\*Includes 25 existing Breaking the Cycle clusters

### **Total expenditure on Giving Children an Even Break**

*What was the breakdown on spending on posts and grants?*

Table 3 presents a breakdown of total expenditure on the urban and rural dimensions of GCEB. As shown, at the start of the scheme, the majority of the expenditure (slightly more than half of the total) was on grants. However, by 2003/2004, almost 70% of the total expenditure was on staffing. This would appear to be accounted for by the increase in the number of teachers associated with the scheme in urban (Table 1) and rural (Table 2) schools since the first year. It should also be noted that the percentage of the grant as a proportion of the total cost decreases from year to year. However, even this figure is probably an under-representation of the decrease because it does not take into account rises in teachers' salaries over the period.

Table 3. Breakdown of total expenditure on posts and grants associated with Giving Children an Even Break (source: Department of Education and Science).

School Year	Cost of posts (notional - based on €40k per teacher)**	Cost of grants	% of total accounted for by grant	Total
2000/2001	<b>€ 8,960,000</b>	<b>€ 4,785,856</b>	<b>53.4%</b>	<b>€ 13,745,856</b>
2001/2002	<b>€ 10,871,711</b>	<b>€ 4,621,581</b>	<b>42.5%</b>	<b>€ 15,493,292</b>
2002/2003	<b>€ 14,366,955</b>	<b>€ 4,996,185</b>	<b>34.8%</b>	<b>€ 19,363,140</b>
2003/2004	<b>€ 15,497,747</b>	<b>€ 5,032,730</b>	<b>32.5%</b>	<b>€ 20,530,477</b>

\*\* Includes BTC urban posts and rural co-ordinator posts

*What proportion of the grant allocation went to schools receiving the minimum grant of €952.30?*

Any school that returned a survey and had at least one pupil with characteristics associated with disadvantage received the minimum grant payable under the scheme (€952.30). In 2003/2004, of the total grant of €5,032,730, €1,056,873 (about one-fifth) was spent on minimum grants to such schools (i.e., schools with small numbers of qualifying pupils).

*What was the urban/rural breakdown of resources?*

The distribution of financial grants was fairly equal for urban and rural schools in 2003/2004, with urban schools receiving slightly more than half of all grant money available (52%), and rural schools receiving the remainder (48%) (Table 4).

However, urban schools fared better than rural in the allocation of posts, where the ratio was between 5:1 and 6:1 in favour of urban schools.

Table 4. Breakdown of total GCEB allocations in 2003/2004, by location (source: Department of Education and Science).

Location	Number of schools	Number of posts	Costs of posts	Costs of grants	Total funding (posts and grants)
Urban	<b>819</b>	<b>323*</b>	<b>€ 12,920,000</b>	<b>€ 2,617,020</b>	<b>€ 15,537,020</b>
Rural	<b>1,526</b>	<b>55*</b>	<b>€ 2,577,747**</b>	<b>€ 2,415,710</b>	<b>€ 4,983,457</b>
Total	<b>2,345</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>€ 15,497,747</b>	<b>€ 5,032,730</b>	<b>€ 20,530,477</b>

\*Includes existing posts under Breaking the Cycle urban (74) and rural (25).

\*\*Includes unclusterable grants

### **Support services for schools in the scheme**

According to the accompanying DES documentation, a key principle of the scheme was that:

- A programme of school and teacher support would be put in place by the Department of Education and Science so that the pupils concerned receive the maximum benefit from reduced class sizes and the additional financial allocations (Appendix 4)

In the case of rural schools, two days in-service training was provided for rural co-ordinators on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> October 2003. There was no support in place for co-

ordinators prior to this. From the 2003/2004 school year, rural co-ordinators also have access to support from the National Co-ordinator for Disadvantage Initiatives. In addition to the above, cluster co-ordinators receive support through their participation in networking activities with Home-School-Community Liaison co-ordinators at local and regional level. Although staff in rural schools received support as outlined above, two proposed support teams for teachers were not provided (one to help teachers in urban schools exploit the smaller classes and another to support the work of the rural co-ordinators).

### **Independent evaluation of the scheme**

According to the DES website, “Implementation of the New Programme should be planned and reviewed and the Programme will be subject to independent evaluation” (Appendix 4). Apart from the current exercise, no evaluation of the scheme has taken place. An examination of whether the resources are being used in ways which are consistent with other key principles outlined in the DES documentation (e.g., the suggestion that additional teaching and financial resources must be targeted at those pupils most in need if they are to make a difference) has, therefore, not been carried out.

### **Some general comments on the scheme**

Many of the practical aspects of Giving Children an Even Break were successfully implemented. Very few schools that returned a survey did not receive at least a financial allocation under the scheme. Any school with at least one, but fewer than fifteen, eligible pupils qualified for the minimum payment of €952.30. A significant proportion (about one-fifth) of the total funding disbursed to schools went to schools which were allocated this minimum grant. Because these schools contained small numbers of target pupils, it has been argued that the minimum grant is wasteful, and could have been put to better use in schools with greater concentrations of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. While this may be the case in large schools with only a few target pupils, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds may have represented the majority in some small schools which received the minimum grant (e.g., 14 disadvantaged pupils out of a total enrolment of 26). In such cases, it would be difficult to argue that the grant was not warranted. Unfortunately, for purposes of the

current exercise, it is not possible to differentiate between the two types of school that received the minimum grant.

Financial grants represented a small proportion of the total cost of the scheme, with over two-thirds of the cost going on salaries. About one-quarter of all surveyed urban schools were considered for additional staff under the programme, and about half of these were allocated posts. About one-quarter of rural schools received a share in a post or, in the case of unclusterable schools, a compensatory financial allocation. One factor which proved problematic in the allocation of posts to urban schools was that Traveller and special needs pupils were not counted when determining pupil numbers for purposes of staff allocation. Because the DES promotes a policy of integration into mainstream classes for these pupils, the likely outcome of this approach is that the effective class size for pupils in these schools would exceed the maxima of 20:1 at junior and 27:1 at senior level. This seems particularly unfortunate given the disadvantaged backgrounds of the pupils involved. The implementation of staffing arrangements in rural areas was not unproblematic, with schools in some clusters experiencing difficulty attracting staff. In the 2003/2004 school year, a significant minority (30%) of cluster co-ordinator posts remain unfilled.

Finally, it is very likely that the implementation of the scheme suffered as a result of a lack of inservice training for teachers of classes in which sizes were reduced, and a failure to provide a support team for participating schools. The literature on class size reduction initiatives and professional development (Archer & Weir, 2004) indicates that teachers require ongoing support and training in order to derive maximum benefit from initiatives such as GCEB. Also, the absence of an evaluation of the scheme makes it difficult to assess its effectiveness in a range of areas.

## **References**

Archer, P., & Weir, S. (2004). *Addressing disadvantage: A review of the international literature and of strategy in Ireland*. Summary report to the Educational Disadvantage Committee. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

- Department of Education and Science (n.d). *Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage*. Retrieved March 15, 2004 from [http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=17216&category=17216&feature=si\\_introduction&sectionpage=12251&language=EN&link=link001&page=1&doc=16172](http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=17216&category=17216&feature=si_introduction&sectionpage=12251&language=EN&link=link001&page=1&doc=16172)
- Department of Education and Science (December 1999). *£194 Million Plan to Tackle Educational Disadvantage* “Unprecedented plan represents largest ever effort to make education system responsive to needs of all” Dublin Castle. Retrieved March 15, 2004 from [http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=10861&category=10861&feature=archive\\_pr&sectionpage=13637&language=EN&link=link001&page=1&doc=13893](http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=10861&category=10861&feature=archive_pr&sectionpage=13637&language=EN&link=link001&page=1&doc=13893)
- Kellaghan, T., Weir, S., Ó hUallacháin, S., & Morgan, M. (1995). *Educational disadvantage in Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Education / Combat Poverty Agency / Educational Research Centre.
- Weir, S. (1999). *An analysis of the application variables used to select schools for the Breaking the Cycle scheme*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre .

## APPENDIX 1

The following five variables and weights were used to compute an index of disadvantage in urban schools:

The percentage of pupils in the school (or in the highest grade in the school<sup>4</sup>)

- living in a family in which the main breadwinner is currently unemployed X 2;
- living in a family that holds a medical card X 2;
- living in a rented local authority house or flat X 2;
- living in a lone-parent household X 1;
- for which the school received a grant under the *School Books for Needy Pupils Grant Scheme* X 1.

Urban schools were thus ranked in order from the highest on the basis of the total points accrued (up to a maximum of 800) as a result of summing their points on these five indicators.

In the case of rural schools, the following four variables and weights were used:

The percentage of pupils in the school (or in the highest grade in the school)

- living in a family in which the main breadwinner is currently unemployed X 2;
- living in a family that holds a medical card X 2;
- living in a family which receives financial assistance because of limited means from farm income X 2;
- for which the school received a grant under the *School Books for Needy Pupils Grant Scheme* X 1.

---

<sup>4</sup> Schools with fewer than 160 pupils were asked to provide data on all pupils in the school, while schools with 160 pupils or more were asked to provide data on pupils in the highest grade level.

## APPENDIX 2

21 August 2000

Peter Baldwin  
Assistant Secretary General  
Department of Education and Science  
Marlborough St  
Dublin 1

Dear Mr Baldwin

### Survey of Disadvantage in Primary Schools

You will recall that, following the announcement in December 1999 of a new set of measures designed to tackle educational disadvantage, the Department of Education and Science engaged the Educational Research Centre to undertake a survey of all primary schools in the country to assess the level of disadvantage in each school. I am pleased to inform you that the survey has been carried out and that processing is now complete. I am enclosing with this letter lists of urban schools which are rank-ordered on the basis of their survey points totals.

A number of points should be noted in relation to the survey. It is acknowledged that the use of school principals as a source of information on socio-economic indicators was not entirely satisfactory. While the possibility of using other methods to obtain the required information was briefly explored, none of the alternatives investigated seemed practical at the time. Therefore, it was decided that information about pupil characteristics would, as has traditionally been the case, be obtained from principal teachers.

Although the survey sought information on a wide range of school and pupil characteristics, a decision was taken to limit the variables used in the rank-ordering of schools in terms of their level of disadvantage to a few key socioeconomic indicators. A number of considerations led to this conclusion. Firstly, indicators such as unemployment, medical card possession, and residence in local authority housing have been widely used as indicators in previous attempts to assess disadvantage at the level of the school. Secondly, these variables were found to be valid indicators of disadvantage in analyses of schools' applications to be included in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme. It was, however, decided that this information could be augmented by the inclusion of additional variables also considered to relate to levels of disadvantage (e.g., percentage of needy pupils for whom the school receives a grant for free books).



As it was acknowledged that the completion of questionnaires by principal teachers would be a demanding task, an attempt was made to reduce the burden in large schools by permitting principals to base their answers to questions on the socio-economic characteristics of pupils in a specific grade rather than in the whole school. To ensure comparability of responses, the highest grade level in the school was specified. This was because the questionnaire contained other questions about the achievements and attainments of pupils at that grade.

Because of differences between schools in size and location, it was not possible to use the same variables to rank schools in urban and rural areas. For the purpose of the survey, schools located in areas with populations of fewer than 1,500 people were categorised as 'rural', while schools in areas where the population numbered 1,500 or more were categorised as 'urban/town'.

The following five variables and weights were used to compute an index of disadvantage in urban schools:

The percentage of pupils in the school (or in the highest grade in the school)

- living in a family in which the main breadwinner is currently unemployed X 2;
- living in a family that holds a medical card X 2;
- living in a rented local authority house or flat X 2;
- living in a lone-parent household X 1;
- for which the school received a grant under the *School Books for Needy Pupils Grant Scheme* X 1.

On the accompanying list, schools are ranked in order from the highest to the lowest among the 825 urban schools that returned questionnaires. The total points accrued (up to a maximum of 800) by each school as a result of summing their points on the five indicators are shown.

In terms of resource allocation, it is suggested that three times as many resources should be allocated to urban schools as to rural schools. The reasoning behind this relates to the absolute numbers of pupils served by schools in urban and rural settings: if all schools, regardless of their location, are placed in descending order of the total points obtained on three indicators which were common to both urban and rural schools, the ratio of total enrolment in urban schools to that in rural schools at various cut-off points is approximately 3:1. Thus, allocating more resources to urban than to rural schools will increase the number of disadvantaged children that stand to benefit.

An obvious means of assisting schools serving disadvantaged pupils is to reduce the size of classes. Such an approach was adopted in the urban dimension of the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme in which the pupil-teacher ratio in Junior classes was reduced to about 15:1. This approach might also be considered in the current situation. However, given the large number of schools competing for resources, it is worth considering whether a greater proportion of the available resources should be targeted on a smaller number of pupils or whether resources should be spread more widely where they would impact on a greater number of pupils. In the current situation, reducing Junior class sizes to a maximum of

about 20:1, for example, would clearly result in greater numbers of schools and pupils benefiting from the available resources.

It should be kept in mind that reducing class size, in itself, may not be sufficient to impact positively on pupil achievements. Research suggests that class size reduction needs to be accompanied by support for teachers, such as appropriate inservice training, to enable them to adapt their teaching styles and methods, if pupils are to derive maximum benefit from the more favourable pupil-teacher ratio. Thus, the importance of providing continuing support to teachers after class sizes have been reduced is indicated.

Finally, in light of earlier experience, may I suggest that, before allocating resources to individual schools, a sample of returns should be examined to check the validity of the information provided in the survey. Consultation with members of the Inspectorate should help ensure that reported levels of disadvantage reflect accurately the situation in schools with which they have a high degree of familiarity, and that resources are equitably distributed.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

---

Susan Weir

## APPENDIX 3

9 October 2000

Peter Baldwin  
Assistant Secretary General  
Department of Education and Science  
Marlborough St  
Dublin 1

Dear Mr Baldwin

### Survey of Disadvantage in Primary Schools (Rural Dimension)

You will recall that, following the announcement in December 1999 of a new set of measures designed to tackle educational disadvantage, the Department of Education and Science engaged the Educational Research Centre to undertake a survey of all primary schools in the country to assess the level of disadvantage in each school. I am pleased to enclose, with this letter, a list of rural schools which are rank-ordered on the basis of their survey points total. On 21 August, we wrote to you and sent you the corresponding list of urban schools. We did not send the rural list on that occasion because, shortly before, we had been asked by the Department to produce a map on which was shown the location of

- the top 350 ranked rural schools
- schools in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme that did not feature in the top 350 ranked rural schools
- schools that had not yet availed of their allocation of a part-time Home/School /Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme coordinator
- nine schools whose survey results had incorrectly indicated that the school was in an urban setting.

The task of mapping these schools was completed, with the help of the Department's Inspectors of Schools, in early September. We were then asked by the Department to make proposals for dividing the schools into clusters on a geographic basis. These proposals will be mentioned again later in this letter.

A number of points should be noted in relation to the survey. It is acknowledged that the use of school principals as a source of information on socio-economic indicators was not entirely satisfactory. While the possibility of using other methods to obtain the required information was briefly explored, none of the alternatives investigated seemed practical at the time. Further consideration of these alternatives, in the context of future attempts to identify levels of disadvantage, would, in our view, be worthwhile. For the purposes of the recent survey, however, it was decided that information about pupil characteristics would, as has been done previously, be obtained from principal teachers.

Although the survey sought information on a wide range of school and pupil characteristics, a decision was taken to limit the variables used in the rank-ordering of schools in terms of their level of disadvantage to a few key socioeconomic indicators. A number of considerations led to this conclusion. Firstly, indicators such as unemployment and medical card possession have been widely used as indicators in previous attempts to assess disadvantage at the level of the school. Secondly, these variables were found to be valid indicators of disadvantage in analyses of schools' applications to be included in the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme. It was, however, decided that this information could be augmented by the inclusion of additional variables also considered to relate to levels of disadvantage (e.g., percentage of pupils for whom the school receives a grant for free books). It may be possible to take into account other data that were gathered, but not used, in the present rank-ordering exercise to inform decisions about resource allocation in 2001 and 2002.

As it was acknowledged that the completion of questionnaires by principal teachers would be a demanding task, an attempt was made to reduce the burden in large schools by permitting principals to base their answers to questions on the socio-economic characteristics of pupils in a specific grade rather than in the whole school. To ensure comparability of responses, the highest grade level in the school was specified. This was because the questionnaire contained other questions about the achievements and attainments of pupils at that grade.

Previous research in the Research Centre and elsewhere has shown that educational disadvantage manifests itself differently in urban and rural locations. It would, therefore, be inappropriate to use the same variables to rank schools in urban and rural areas. For the purpose of the survey, schools located in areas with populations of fewer than 1,500 people were categorised as 'rural', while schools in areas where the population numbered 1,500 or more were categorised as 'urban/town'. It is likely that there will be some anomalies in relation to schools in areas where the population is close to 1,500. As agreed previously, we are attempting to establish the number of any such anomalies.

The following four variables and weights were used to compute an index of disadvantage in rural schools:

The percentage of pupils in the school (or in the highest grade in the school)

- living in a family in which the main breadwinner is currently unemployed X 2;
- living in a family that holds a medical card X 2;
- living in a family which receives financial assistance because of limited means from farm income X 2;
- for which the school received a grant under the *School Books for Needy Pupils Grant Scheme* X 1.

On the accompanying list, the 1,562 rural schools that returned questionnaires are ranked in order from the highest to the lowest in terms of total points accrued (up to a maximum of 700). Each school's total points is also shown.

In terms of resource allocation, it is suggested that three times as many resources should be allocated to urban schools as to rural schools. The reasoning behind this relates to the

absolute numbers of pupils served by schools in urban and rural settings. If all schools, regardless of their location, are placed in descending order of the total points obtained on three indicators which were common to both urban and rural schools, the ratio of total enrolment in urban schools to that in rural schools at various cut-off points is approximately 3:1. Thus, allocating more resources to urban than to rural schools will increase the number of disadvantaged children that stand to benefit.

Reductions in the size of classes in rural schools serving disadvantaged pupils is probably not a realistic option in most cases. Therefore, other means of assisting these schools will have to be found. One obvious possibility would be to provide additional teachers to support and coordinate clusters of schools. It was on this basis that we responded to a request from the Department for proposals for the clustering of the schools that we had mapped. We tried to propose clusters of five schools wherever possible and only proposed clusters of fewer than four schools where one or two schools had an unused allocation under the HSCL scheme. The views of eleven Inspectors of Schools were sought during the clustering exercise. Our understanding is that our proposals are now being considered by the Department.

The fact that a clustering approach was adopted in the rural dimension of the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme enabled a similar approach to be considered in the current situation. However, a number of modifications should be considered. In particular, it may be necessary to develop a more precise definition of the role of the newly appointed teachers/coordinators than was the case in *Breaking the Cycle*. This role definition should make clear that the support to be given to schools is intended to be in relation to their work with their disadvantaged pupils. In this context, it is worth recalling that we estimate that, among the schools in the top 350 on the enclosed ranked list, the percentage of disadvantaged pupils per school ranges from 30% to 90%. In practice, the achievement of the intended targeting could prove very difficult and a number of strategies will need to be considered and, perhaps, tried out. Furthermore the recruitment of qualified teachers to coordinator posts may present difficulties. Finally the fact that many existing *Breaking the Cycle* clusters will be affected by the proposal of new clusters may also prove problematic.

In addition, it is important to recognise that not all of the schools to be targeted can be placed in clusters (we were able to propose clusters for about 75% of the schools that we were considering). Therefore, methods of supporting "unclusterable" schools will have to be devised. Consideration might be given to (a) an offer of part-time hours as is done in the recent extension of the HSCL scheme, (b) substitute cover to enable teachers to engage in work related to their disadvantaged pupils (e.g., contact with parents, liaison with other agencies, school planning) or (c) a system in which schools are invited to apply for support for particular targeted initiatives.

The position of unclusterable schools might also be helped by the establishment of a central "Support and Development Unit". Such a unit could carry out some of the functions envisaged for the local coordinators (i.e., those that do not require sustained or frequent contact with individual schools such as accessing suitable equipment or providing advice on new techniques). Such a unit might also have a role in relation to the wider package of measures that are about to be introduced. It could, for example, get involved in

- the training of teachers and other concerned individuals that will clearly be necessary
- identifying more precisely the needs of rural schools serving disadvantaged pupils
- disseminating emerging good practice and

- the collection of relevant data (e.g., on pupil achievement) from participating schools.

Finally, we want to reiterate a point made previously about the importance of examining a sample of returns to check the validity of the information provided in the survey.

Consultation with members of the Inspectorate should help ensure that reported levels of disadvantage reflect accurately the situation in schools with which they have a high degree of familiarity, and that resources are equitably distributed.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Peter Archer

Susan Weir

## **APPENDIX 4**

The Minister for Education & Science, Dr Michael Woods, T.D., launched the New Programme - Giving Children an Even Break by tackling disadvantage in primary schools on 4th January, 2001. The New Programme was estimated to cost €33m over a three-year period and to involve the provision of additional teaching and financial allocations to participating schools over that period.

The key principles underlying the New Programme were:

- Participating schools were to be selected on the basis of the findings of the independent survey of educational disadvantage in primary schools carried out by the Education Research Centre
- Schools already in receipt of additional resources under disadvantage schemes would retain those entitlements and may be eligible for additional entitlements under the New Programme
- The additional resources to be allocated would be related to the level of concentration in each school of pupils who have background characteristics that are associated with educational disadvantage and early school leaving
- A reduced pupil teacher ratio in the early years is an effective intervention for pupils most at risk of educational disadvantage
- The additional teaching and financial resources must be targeted at those pupils most in need if they are to make a difference.
- Implementation of the New Programme should be planned and reviewed and the Programme will be subject to independent evaluation
- The effective delivery of educational and other necessary services should be assisted locally through collaboration by both voluntary and statutory agencies
- A programme of school and teacher support would be put in place by the Department of Education and Science so that the pupils concerned receive the maximum benefit from reduced class sizes and the additional financial allocations

### **Key Features of the New Programme**

There are separate urban/town and rural aspects to the New Programme.

#### **Urban schools**

- Selected schools, in locations with populations in excess of 1,500, that have the highest concentrations of at risk pupils, would be allocated necessary additional teaching posts to implement the maximum class sizes of 20:1 in all Junior classes (infants through second classes) and of 29:1 pupils in Senior

classes (third through sixth classes). From September, 2002, the maximum class size in senior classes would be reduced to 27:1.

- A special €63.49 per capita grant will be paid in respect of the percentage of pupils with disadvantaged characteristics, with a minimum payment of €952.30 to each school.

### **Rural schools**

- In rural areas, schools with the highest concentrations of at risk pupils would be allocated the services of a teacher/coordinator to work with clusters of 4 or 5 schools. This person will work with pupils, parents and teachers.
- Schools with the highest concentrations that cannot be clustered with other schools with similarly high levels of need would receive appropriate financial support as an alternative to teacher/coordinator support. Guidance would be provided by the support service in this regard.
- A special €63.49 per capita grant will be paid in respect of the percentage of pupils with disadvantaged characteristics and schools would receive a minimum payment of €952.30.

### **Schools in the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme and/or Breaking the Cycle Pilot Project**

- Schools already in receipt of additional resources under the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme (DAS) and/or Breaking the Cycle Pilot Project (BTC) would retain their entitlements under those schemes.
- Urban schools designated as serving areas of disadvantage would be eligible to receive additional teachers to implement the new maximum class sizes provided for under the Programme i.e. 20:1 in all Junior classes (infants through second classes) and of 29:1 pupils (27:1 from September, 2002) in all Senior classes (third through sixth classes).
- Schools in DAS and BTC were already in receipt of an annual per capita grant of €38.09 per pupil. Under the New Programme, an additional €25.39 per capita grant would now be paid to these schools in respect of the percentage of pupils with disadvantaged characteristics, with an overall minimum payment of €952.30 to each school.

### **Matters to be considered by schools**

All schools invited to participate in the Programme will need to consider the steps necessary to implement the Programme in their schools in accordance with the key principles outlined and having regard to their circumstances. While it is acknowledged that many schools will already have addressed most of the issues involved, schools are requested in particular to consider action in relation to the following:



- The preparation of a three year development plan covering the period of the New Programme and the development of appropriate school policies which encourage the continued enrolment of pupils who are most at risk of educational disadvantage and supports their retention within the school.
- Collaborative planning with the representatives of local statutory and voluntary agencies for the integrated delivery of appropriate services for the targeted young people and their families and the provision of suitable in-school and out-of-school supports for these pupils.
- Examination of the deployment of existing teaching and financial resources to maximise their impact for the targeted children and to ensure the implementation of the new maximum class sizes as soon as the appropriate teaching support is in place
- Co-operation with programme coordinators and/or support service
- Targeting the new financial resources on the provision of appropriate in-school and out-of-school supports for the pupils concerned. The support service will provide additional guidance in this matter.
- The identification of the needs of the individual targeted pupils – curricular and learning needs and social and personal needs – and the development of strategies that best meet those needs. The support service will be available to advise schools and teachers in this regard.
- Measures to support and involve parents in their children’s education
- Participation in in-career development
- Reporting, evaluation and accounting requirements