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NTWF position paper on Education

Introduction

The National Traveller Women's Forum (NTWF) is the national network of Traveller women and Traveller women's organisations from throughout Ireland.

The NTWF recognises the particular oppression of Traveller women in Irish society and are working to address this issue through the provision of opportunities to Traveller women to meet, share experiences, ideas and develop collective strategies and skills to work towards the enhancement of their position in society. Our ethnic status as members of the Traveller Community is the foundation on which all our work is built.

Current Role of the NTWF

The NTWF currently represents members on the National Traveller Education Strategy Advisory and Consultative Forum and also through direct communication with members.

Critical Issues in relation to Traveller Education provision:

Prior to the 1990s Traveller interaction with the education system could be characterised as one of apathy and suspicion: an apathy and suspicion created by years of neglect and failure by the State to address the question of how to deliver appropriate education to a community who at the time were still primarily nomadic. Initial attempts by the State to 'educate' focused on punitive measures to force Travellers to participate in the education system. The early years of the State were marked by a period of ignorance in regard to the educational needs of the Traveller community and were a period which saw a failed attempt to introduce compulsory registration of the Traveller community and the removal of their children into industrial schools¹. The report of the Commission on Itinerancy in 1963 had the stated objective of assimilation of the Traveller community through the education system, however the Department of Education's response to the Report and the delivery of education at a local level was segregationist. Traveller only special classes and in some cases Traveller only special schools were established, these schools and classes became an integral part of education provision for Travellers right up until the mid 1990s. Also alongside these Traveller only special schools and classes was a remedial education support system based on identity and not real educational need which involved the withdrawal of Traveller children from mainstream classes to classrooms with Traveller resource teachers.

Positive Developments:

The 1995 Task Force report on the Travelling Community reflected many of the issues and concerns for Travellers in the education system and it made 167 recommendations regarding the development and provision of Education to Travellers at all levels. These recommendations identified key fundamentals with regard to Education and Training to Travellers such as equality of opportunity and acknowledgment of and respect for cultural diversity. In 2003 the Department of Education and Science (DES) established a joint working group to oversee the development of a Traveller Education Strategy including Traveller representation.

¹ Sections 19-21 School Attendance Bill, 1942

Traveller Education Strategy:

In 2006 the findings of the working group were formulated into the Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy. On the positive side the report represented the first real opportunity for Travellers to influence and shape the policy, design and delivery of education to Travellers. With the core principle of inclusion in mainstream education underpinning the strategy this represented the final break by the State from the historical policy of segregation within education provision for Travellers.

NTWF Position – What we want to see progress on:

The National Traveller Women's forum very much indorses the principle of inclusion contained in the Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy as the way forward for Travellers in education. The strategy recognises the *inclusion of Travellers in the mainstream education system, in a way that respects Travellers' cultural identity, including nomadism'* The key conclusion of the TES was that *'all educational provision for Travellers be integrated, in a phased manner, in an enhanced mainstream provision that will result in an inclusive model of educational provision. It is paramount that future education services, therefore, are not provided in a manner that creates new segregation within mainstream provision'*. For the NTWF the key priorities are:

- **Resources:** Lobby for adequate resources to be made available to support Travellers to access high quality education leading to mainstream employment
- **Retention and Attainment:** retention has greatly increased in primary school likewise the transfer rate from primary to second level education has significantly improved. The attainment and retention level of Traveller students in second level education remains of grave concern. Figures from the Department of Education over the last number of years highlight Traveller students who complete the senior cycle at second level represent less than 20% of those who start second level. This drop out rate of 80% for Traveller students is almost the complete reversal to that of their settled peers where the retention rate is more 80%.
- **Negative Experience:** Continuing low expectations of Traveller students by education providers is still prevalent, coupled with continued negative experiences of Traveller children within the education system and a lack of representation or visibility of Traveller culture or experience addressed within the curriculum.
- **Training needs of education providers:** Equality and diversity training should be a compulsory component of the pre-service, induction and continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers. It should continue to be a component of the CPD of inspectors and of the personnel of the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) and Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP).
- **Traveller parents:** The TES sets out a number of measures and recommendations in regard to parents, educational needs, school-parent relationship and the need to ensure that schools welcome, respect and support Traveller parents in becoming more involved in school life. This includes the importance of Traveller parents in the representation structures of schools and we believe it is essential that this is inclusive of boards of management within schools.
- **Discriminatory Enrolment Policies:** The NTWF call on the Department to act immediately to address discriminatory enrolment policies including the 'parent rule' which prevent Travellers having equal choice in the schools which their children can attend.
- **Adult Education and Employment** – Within the strategy there are examples of Traveller women in various courses both in further education and in third level institutions and in the area of employment within the HSE as Traveller community health workers – despite this there is major gaps in employment opportunities in the mainstream labour market for Traveller women. 2006 census shows that only 19 Traveller women had obtained a third level qualification at degree or higher level²
- **Training Centres** - One of the primary areas where training has been heavily resourced by the state has been Senior Traveller Training Centres which provided a segregated form of training/education to Traveller women. These centres were shown to have provided no real progression in the formal labour market and have begun to be phased out. However no viable alternative to address the educational need of older Traveller women has been formulated. The phasing out of the centres while welcome on one level also represents a further example of cuts purely for budgetary reasons

² Census 2006 - **Table 24 Irish Travellers aged 15 years and over, classified by highest level of education completed and sex**