

School Completion Programme, Ireland

1. Brief description of the School Completion Programme

The School Completion Programme (SCP) delivers a range of local interventions in disadvantaged communities which support the retention of young people in education. The programme enables local communities to develop tailored strategies to maximise participation levels of those at risk of early school leaving in the education process. It entails targeting individual young people of school-going age¹, both in and out of school, and arranging supports to address inequalities in education access, participation and outcomes.

Local projects operate under the management and direction of a Local Management Committee (LMC). The LMC is comprised of representatives of the schools involved and may include representatives from parents and other local voluntary and statutory services. The LMC is responsible for the governance of the project, including the use of project resources and accountability for public funds made available by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs through the Child and Family Agency (Tusla).

Local decision making is a key feature of the project model approach. Each year projects assess the needs of local young people at risk of early school leaving to devise a costed and targeted proposal of interventions (known as the Retention Plan). The School Retention Plans typically contain a range of initiatives and supports which are delivered at a targeted, whole school / whole class level, where appropriate, in-school, after-school, out-of-school and during holiday periods. In keeping with international research on what works in preventing early school leaving, initiatives include:

- Individual support to young people at risk of early school leaving (personal, social, emotional, behavioural and academic support);
- Attendance tracking and monitoring of young people most at risk of early school leaving in order to promote better school attendance and putting in place interventions and supports to improve school attendance;
- Transfer programmes to support young people transitioning from primary to post-primary school and at other key educational milestones;
- Breakfast supports for young people who do not have access to a healthy breakfast to start the school day;
- After school supports for young people who may struggle to participate and engage in the normal school day;
- Homework supports for young people who may need additional support to complete school coursework;
- Mentoring programmes which support young people most at risk of early school leaving within school and beyond;
- Holiday educational supports for young people to support 'connectedness' to school, prevent 'summer slide' for young people and to build relationships with young people in less formal school settings;
- Art therapy, play therapy, music therapy and drama therapy;
- Out-of-school educational supports to young people at risk of early school leaving through bridging support between home and school, academic supports and suspension intervention support.

¹ Education in Ireland is compulsory from the ages of six to sixteen or until students have completed three years of second-level education

2. Need/challenge addressed

Attendance, behaviour, emotional/mental health, motivation, social and family.

3. Level of intervention

The SCP is a selected prevention measure for groups of students at moderate levels of risk/need. In 2012/13, there were 124 local SCP projects supporting approximately 36,000 targeted young people in 470 primary and 224 post primary schools and almost 600 young people out-of-school.

4. Intensity of the intervention

The SCP provides is an ongoing measure of intervention that was first introduced in 2002.

5. Target group and age group

The SCP targets children at risk of not reaching their full potential in the educational system because of poor attendance, engagement and attainment. It is available to both primary and post primary students paying particular attention to children at risk of early school leaving.

6. Conditions and different steps necessary for the implementation of the SCP

The SCP is a central element of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) plan, which is a policy instrument for educational inclusion. The DEIS Action Plan brings together a range of school based supports aimed at improving educational outcomes in some 878 targeted schools throughout the country. The SCP was first introduced in 2002 by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the programme was significantly expanded in 2005 with the roll-out of supports under DEIS. On its establishment the SCP subsumed a number of earlier schemes with related objectives, namely the Early School Leavers Initiative (ESLI) and the Stay in School Retention Scheme (SSRI). In May 2011 responsibility for the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) and its services was transferred from the Minister for Education and Skills to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. In January 2014, the NEWB was disbanded and the educational welfare services of the Board transferred into the new Child and Family Agency (Tusla).

7. Identifying the appropriate type and level of support to suit the needs of the learner

Each project is governed by a Local Management Committee comprising a Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer. Membership usually comprises the principals of participating schools, the SCP Local Co-ordinator, the Home School Community Liaison teacher and representatives from a range of external educational, statutory, voluntary, community and youth services. The Retention Plan, which includes the range of supports to be provided in the school-community over an academic year cycle, is signed off by the Local Management Committee.

8. Stakeholders involved in the delivery of the SCP

The supports and interventions are delivered in a number of ways. Each project has a dedicated full-time Local Co-ordinator who delivers support and intervention to the target group. Projects also employ project workers, who have the responsibility of delivering directly to the target group in an individual school or in a number of schools. Projects also use sessional staff (contract of service) to deliver direct intervention and support. Sessional staff can be used, for example, in the delivery of therapeutic supports but project staff can also have therapeutic skills as part of their skills-base.

Collaboration with other stakeholders such as social workers, psychologists, Educational Welfare Officers, youth services etc. arise formally and informally. New practice from Tulsa, the Child and Family Agency will solidify collaborative approaches.

9. Overall responsibility for implementation of the SCP

The Local Co-ordinator leads the development and implementation of the programme under the direction of the School Completion Programme Local Management Committee and in consultation with the school principals.

10. Obstacles in introducing the SCP

The establishment of the SCP involved a large cultural change for schools. At the outset the concept of operating within a project structure was unfamiliar to many schools and there were initial reservations about the project workers not being teachers. Cluster meetings were held regularly which helped build relations between the different types of schools and the various community groupings and agencies. The fact that project workers brought other skills such as care work, counselling etc. was received as a valuable contribution. The running of Breakfast Clubs and Homework Clubs by project workers also provided much needed support for students and this supplemented the work of the teachers. The concept of targeting students for supports was also a new departure at that time and was assisted with detailed guidance combined with continual support and monitoring for this element of the work.

11. Monitoring/assessing the SCP

The overall responsibility for devising, implementing, monitoring and reviewing the range of supports is that of the Local Management Committee of each SCP project. The effectiveness of supports and interventions and outcomes for individual learners and the local project as a whole are monitored and reviewed locally. Projects must profile learners most at risk, the criteria for targeting that learner, the appropriate and proportionate supports and interventions to respond to need, and the learning outcomes associated with intervention. Projects must also set cluster-level targets for the target group which can include, amongst others, improved attendance, reduction of chronic absenteeism, 100% transfer between primary and post-primary education, reduction in suspensions/behavioural infringements, improved % of the target group sitting the Junior Certificate, improved % of the target group sitting the Leaving Certificate, greater parental involvement, and better engagement of target group in school through the promotion of intervention to support social, emotional and personal development.

Projects must also implement an annual review day, with the aim of reviewing all supports at project level and their effectiveness, and progress on local targets. Local projects submit a review report, a sample of interventions implemented locally (outlining the decision to discontinue, amend or retain) on a standardised template and a spreadsheet of all interventions outlining whether interventions were reviewed, their costs and decision by Committee to retain, discontinue or amend to Tulsa, the Child and Family Agency for quality assurance purposes.

Projects must also submit financial records of expenditure and annual progress reports to Tulsa, the Child and Family Agency. The annual progress report provides detailed data with respect to targeting practices, interagency collaboration, the number of targeted learners who left school early before completion of Leaving Certificate and their progression, review practices including progress on local targets set in a given academic year, and efficacy of interventions implemented and decisions to retain, alter or discontinue.

Financial expenditure reports are assessed by a dedicated administrator at national level. Annual Progress Reports are inputted and analysed by a Research and Development Manager with the purpose of measuring overall programme activity.

Projects are recommended to evaluate supports and interventions internally and to build the evidence-base for intervention inclusion at local level through robust evaluation approaches. However, some projects have invested in external evaluation. The national programme is currently being reviewed by the Economic and Social Research Institute with the aim of recommending appropriate governance structures for the programme and to ascertain best practice interventions that provide the best outcomes for at-risk learners.

12. Results of the SCP

Evidence from local projects target-setting, early school leaving and progression data and intervention data suggest that for the majority of targeted students, there are improvements in attendance, transfer between primary and post-primary and retention to Junior Certificate. This local evidence is supported by national reports produced by the Department of Education and Skills on retention rates within state supported second level schools – the latest report published in February 2015² indicates that the average retention rate for DEIS schools continues to increase with 82.1% of those entering secondary school in 2008 completing the Leaving Certificate. By comparison the completion rate in 2001 was 68.2%. Equally, the most recent Annual Attendance Report produced by Tusla, Child and Family Agency (2011/2012) highlights that primary schools non-attendance is generally higher in schools involved in the DEIS School Support Programme (SSP) for designated schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities. However, there continues to be an important urban/rural dimension in non-attendance when DEIS and non-DEIS primary schools are compared. General non-attendance and twenty-day absences are higher in urban schools outside DEIS than they are in rural schools within the DEIS programme. This pattern is stable year-on-year. In post-primary schools all forms of non-attendance were higher in schools within the DEIS programme. Around 27% of students in these schools were absent for twenty days or more in 2011/12. This figure is down 1.5% from 2010/11 and down approximately 3% from 2009/10. In schools outside DEIS the figure for 20-day absences was 14.2% for 2011/12, down 0.4% on the previous year.

However, local projects also indicate challenges in relation to addressing chronic absenteeism (over 20 days absent from school), support for Traveller and Roma students, Senior Cycle retention and support for young people with mental and psychological health issues (suicidal thoughts, anger management, social and emotional challenges, bereavement, family breakdown, violence, school refusal, school phobia).

13. Funding/resourcing the SCP

Funding for the programme is provided through the Exchequer. In 2014, €24.756m has been made available to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to fund SCP. The programme operates on an administrative basis under the aegis of the Educational Welfare Services of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla). Tusla continues to fund the programme on this basis.

14. Current status of the SCP

The SCP continues to operate.

15. Further information (e.g. website, contact details, etc)

Further details can be obtained from the DES website at www.education.ie

² <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/Retention-Rates-of-Pupils-in-Second-Level-Schools-2008-Cohort.pdf>

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School Completion Resources available from:

<http://www.tusla.ie/services/educational-welfare-services/publications/scp-publications/>