

An equal start? Providing quality early education and care for disadvantaged children ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Order book [online](#) ^[2], or check your local or university library

Description from Start Strong Ireland ^[3]:

An important new book - *An Equal Start?* - brings together learning from researchers across eight countries on how to achieve what the editors describe as the "double dividend": ensuring high-quality provision to benefit children, while at the same time making services affordable and making access equitable, so that parents - especially in disadvantaged families - can afford to work.

The eight countries examined were chosen because they each involve a "mixed economy" of early care and education services, including private provision. They therefore offer important lessons for Ireland. The eight countries are the UK, France, Netherlands, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, the US and Norway.

In its conclusions, the book identifies a number of lessons that arise when all eight countries are considered together:

- Free, universal services are the most effective way of ensuring high enrolments among the most disadvantaged children, and of ensuring a social mix. Targeted schemes - such as Head Start in the US - tend not to be effective at reaching the families they are trying to target.
- Market competition seems not to improve the quality of early care and education services, partly because it is hard for parents to judge the quality of services, so competition is effectively only based on price. The book discusses approaches that have been taken in different countries to overcome this problem. Two it highlights as relatively successful are: raising the minimum standards for staff qualifications while subsidising costs for lower-income families and capping fees and profits (the Norwegian approach), and the State incentivising quality by providing higher levels of public funding to services with higher quality standards (the New Zealand approach).
- Great care is needed when policies are adopted that lead to a rapid expansion of childcare provision, as there is a real risk of quality being diluted in the process. France and Netherlands are both given as examples of countries where quality fell when access was increased.
- Quality tends to be lower, the more widespread are for-profit services. The eight-country study finds no evidence that for-profit provision results in higher quality, and explores the example of Netherlands as a country where the shift to a competitive childcare market in the mid-2000s led to "a measured decline in the quality of provision".
- Graduates working in early care and education services are only paid adequately in countries where they are part of the school system (such as nursery classes in England, and teachers in the *écoles maternelles* in France), or where trade unions have succeeded in struggling for pay parity with school teachers (as in New Zealand).

Ultimately, the book concludes that it is only possible to achieve both high quality and equitable access if public investment rises - "improving access and raising quality is expensive, and someone has to pay". That investment must be made by the State as "Most parents are unable to cover anything close to the full cost of high-quality provision, just as they would struggle to afford private schooling at compulsory level."

But the book does conclude that in addition to spending more, it's also possible to spend existing resources more effectively. The key to "spending smarter" is, according to the authors:

- Supply-side funding, with subsidies going directly to providers. In contrast, the international examples in the book show that demand-side funding (like tax credits) leads to lower quality provision, and tends not to be effective in promoting parental choice.
- Funding should be more closely tied to regulation, with additional subsidies for higher-quality services, both incentivising higher quality and helping to make quality services more affordable to parents on lower incomes.
- For-profit systems need tight regulations and Government control of fees (e.g. through price caps), as well as incentives for private providers to ensure access for disadvantaged children.

Region: International ^[4]

Tags: poverty ^[5]
quality ^[6]
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