

'Childcare' business or profession? ^[1]

Start Strong conference 2014

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AVAILABILITY

Full report in PDF ^[2]

Conference materials ^[3]

Available conference presentations include:

- Speech by **Jan O'Sullivan**, T.D. Minister for Education and Skills
- Speech by **Ciarín de Buis**, Director of Start Strong
- Presentation by **Ciarín de Buis**, Director of Start Strong
- Presentation by **Helen Penn**, Professor Emerita Cass School of Education, University of East London "How can the Government Ensure that Early Care and Education is of High Quality in a Market System? Learning from International Experience"
- Presentation by **Toby Wolfe**, Policy & Research Officer Start Strong
- Presentation by **Nóirín Hayes**, School of Education TCD, "Ireland's Early Years Policies: Past and Future"
- Presentation by **Gary Ó Donnchadha**, Deputy Chief Inspector, Department of Education and Skills "A Focus on Learning in Early Years Services. The Quality Assurance and Support role of the Inspectorate"
- Presentation by **Brian Lee**, Director of Quality Assurance, TUSLA Child and Family Agency "Tusla's role as a Regulator in the Early Years Sector: Now and in the Future"

'Childcare' business or profession - Report

- Forward by Ciarín de Buis, Director of Start Strong

It's time we had a public debate about how we value our young children and their care and early learning -

The quality of early care and education in Ireland is extremely variable. While some services are excellent, some fail to meet minimum standards - and we know that poor quality can harm children. Meanwhile 50,000 young children are cared for by childminders who work without regulation and without support.

Our government invests a pitifully low amount in early care and education and public funding goes to services without regard to quality.

At the same time, parents in Ireland pay some of the highest 'childcare' costs in the world, without any guarantee of quality. Families often face an all or nothing choice - to work full-time or to leave paid employment entirely. And some parents return to work sooner than they would like, because they cannot afford to take unpaid leave. Some children spend long hours in services, while their parents work to pay their 'childcare' costs.

Service-providers are expected to run an educational service, while also being entrepreneurs and running a financially viable business. Many services aren't financially viable, and have no prospect of being. Some providers make little or no profit. Some, however, are big businesses and make significant profits, often supported by public funding. Some community services are in a precarious financial situation. Working with families living in poverty, they are still expected to operate within a business model of service provision and have to worry about financial sustainability.

Staff in services are on low wages, with many paid an hourly rate barely above the minimum wage. Training and CPD are often at their own expense, and there is no reward for getting a higher qualification. A minimum qualification requirement is only now being introduced, and that requirement is at a basic level.

Our inspections process focuses on health and safety issues. A welcome development is that there will shortly be new 'education focused' inspections, but it is not clear how they will relate to the existing inspection process, nor whether they will look at services for under-3s. And it is far from ideal that the processes are separate.

None of this adds up to high quality early care and education, as a public good. And none of this suggest we, as a nation, cherish our young children.

Contrast this with how we regard our children's school education. We are proud of the quality of our school education system. Schools are valued for the opportunities they offer children, and for their contribution to society. While the funding is never sufficient, our

government invests significantly in our children's school education. All children are entitled to a primary education and parents are not required to pay for it, much less to pay the market-value of primary school. School principals are evaluated on their management and leadership, not their business acumen. Teachers are required to be graduates. They are paid a salary, not an hourly rate, for which they are expected to teach, plan their classroom time, engage in CPD, and engage with parents. Whole-school evaluations focus on the quality of teaching and learning, as well as management and planning.

For too long we have regarded early care and education as 'minding' children to enable their parents to work. It is seen as 'childcare', not early education, and is not grounded in children's rights. It is treated as an industry where services - community and private - are expected to be entrepreneurs running businesses. It is no wonder we have very variable quality.

This report seeks to explore how we can build on all that is positive in our legacy of private and community provision and childminding, and develop a new model of early years services. Not a business model, but a profession, in which public investment allows early years educators to deliver a public service - a public service that is focused on quality, while also accessible and affordable to families. One that puts children's interests first, and places a high value on young children's early care and education.

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