

The childcare problem: We need to listen to what workers are telling us ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Our children are being failed by a childcare system that is simply not fit for purpose. Parents, families, communities, the economy, and childcare professionals are being failed by a model that is broken.

On February 17th, childhood and early-education professionals and students will rally outside the Dáil to protest against the Government's continued failure to deliver childcare and early education that works for families, childcare workers and, most importantly, children. The rally, organised by the Association of Childhood Professionals, will demand the Government recognises and accepts its responsibility for sufficient funding to adequately resource all areas of childcare and childhood education.

Because of low wages, those working in the sector are subsidising early-childhood education and care, and this can't continue. The rally will also highlight the importance of early childhood education and care, and the vital part played by professionals in supporting families and children at this key development stage.

There are a number of practical, simple steps that could be put into action to develop a system we can all be proud of:

STEP 1: Experiencing best practice

Childcare professionals must be exposed to quality practice to reach their full potential and to achieve quality outcomes for children. A number of early education facilities in Ireland are recognised for best practice and identifiable by Tusla (the child and family agency) inspectors. At least one quality service in each county should be funded to open its doors so others working in the sector can understand and experience best practice first hand. I have held many such open days and find childcare providers are crying out for such experience. This would support new ideas and quality care being put into practice around the country.

Similarly, we will only have quality childcare when managers are totally competent in all aspects of running a professional facility. A training and mentoring programme for managers is needed. Managers should have at least two compulsory training days a year with a mentor who knows what it is like to run a busy, quality childcare centre. Tusla inspection reports could identify common areas of non-compliance. Mentoring is what really makes the difference in providing quality services and meeting all regulations.

STEP 2: Increase Funding

We cannot expect professionalism in childcare without funding it. We need an increase of GDP from 0.1 per cent to the European average of 0.7 per cent. Payment for "non-contact" time (not directly caring for children) but spent on necessary documentation should be available to providers. There are many regulatory demands, and rightly so, but no monetary support to ensure regulations are met. All the extra time in administration to deliver government schemes - such as Early Childhood Care and Education, or Training and Employment Childcare - puts pressure on resources.

STEP 3: Providers of free Early Childhood Care and Education should be evaluated by Siolta

Providers of the Government subsidised Early Childhood Care and Education should be evaluated by Siolta (the national quality framework for early childhood education) to ensure all children receive a high standard of care and early education. Currently, two levels of capitation go to providers, with a higher fee for services with staff who have a BA. This is too restrictive and doesn't necessarily mean a centre is a quality service. If the higher fee went to providers with qualified staff as well as a Siolta accredited service, standards would be improved within 18-24 months. I know first-hand that the highest level Siolta award involves a lot of work and commitment. It is a worthwhile process requiring management, staff and parents to work together, resulting in excellent quality of childcare.

STEP 4: Collaboration

The Department needs to work with those providing childcare in order to develop a sustainable, efficient and effective model of care and early education. We will only do that through meaningful collaboration with those at the coalface who have in-depth experience of how to

deliver best outcomes for children and families. We need to listen to those who care for our children and take their insights and opinions on board.

The childcare profession plays a crucial role in community and family life but is undervalued and under-resourced. The Government needs to support those caring for our youngest citizens. Many members of our profession are on little more than minimum wage and we are losing qualified, experienced staff who can't afford to stay in the profession. Earning a professional wage and desiring to support a child's development should not be mutually exclusive.

Region: Europe ^[3]

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