

Quality costs, invest now ^[1]

Association of Childhood Professionals National Rally

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AVAILABILITY

[Rally details and resources](#) ^[2]

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Government needs to start caring more about who's looking after the children

Irish Independent, Feb 18 2015

EXCERPTS

Professionals working in early childhood care and education services took their demands to the streets yesterday with the rally cry 'Quality Costs, Invest Now'.

Some 2,500 people gathered outside the Dáil to call for Government action on the challenges and expectations placed on a poorly resourced sector.

The key fact behind the rally is the stark reality that Ireland currently spends 0.2pc of GDP on the early childhood sector, compared to an OECD average of 0.7pc.

International evidence shows that high quality early childhood care and education is fundamental to the positive development of children and significantly reduces longer term disadvantage across society.

There is also a wealth of economic evidence for greater investment, both in terms of reduced cost for reactive interventions later in life and in supporting parents to engage in the workforce.

As major changes have taken place in the family and workplace in the past 30 years, principally more women at work, the demand for services has grown massively.

The early childhood workforce now represents in excess of 25,000 people and needs to be funded and regulated properly to meet the needs of its employees and employers - and by extension those of children and families.

Research carried out indicates that the average rate of pay is less than €11, just above the minimum wage of €8.65.

As professionals are earning little more than minimum wage, qualified and experienced people are leaving as they can no longer afford to remain in the sector. At present we as employers and employees are, by virtue of our low wages (and voluntary time for meeting parents, admin and maintenance), subsidising early childhood education and care.

Traditionally, the care and education of children in pre-school years in Ireland has been viewed as a family responsibility rather than the societal one and this thinking needs to change.

In marching yesterday, we are not seeking for parents to pay more, nor are we seeking increased strain on service providers. We know that parents are paying as much as they can and that service providers are already struggling to meet staff and running costs.

Debate on this area often suggests a second free pre-school year, providing direct payment to parents, or tax breaks for parents. While such moves would carry some immediate benefit, these are not what yesterday's rally was about.

Childhood professionals are demanding a more fundamental shift in thinking - that the pre-school stage becomes recognised as a critical and integral part of the State's role in care and education.

For example, Finland which is estimated to have one of the best early years systems in the world, spends five times the amount we spend in Ireland and there the sector is highly professionalised and solidly State-supported. We want to effect a move towards this type of model.

Specific changes that are being called for include:

- A national payscale for childhood professionals that is tied to increased Government investment - to be in place within three to five years.

- The ECCE Scheme (free pre-school year) contract extended to include statutory holiday entitlements and training days. This would cease making seasonal workers out of qualified, experienced practitioners.
- Increased availability and uptake of Fetac level 6, Degree and Continuous Professional Development courses.
- Investment in the 'babies to three years' age group.

In recent years, we have seen the development of a number of policy documents for the sector including the Aistear and Síolta Frameworks.

In good faith, childhood professionals, and other groups, have readily engaged 'for the good of the child'. However, we have not had meaningful consultation with the profession and few additional resources have been provided to support their implementation.

Moving forward, childhood professionals are seeking proper consultation on policies and investment, based on what we experience with children and their parents every day of the week. We also need to fast-track the publication of a national early years strategy so that we have a cohesive plan to work from.

The rally was addressed by childhood expert Professor Noirín Hayes and a number of politicians. It was also supported by Impact, Siptu, Barnardos, Early Childhood Ireland, the National Women's Council and the Union of Students in Ireland.

During the past 30 years we have moved from a model of the majority of mothers at home with their children until they go to school to a much more complex and diverse society in terms of both the home and the workplace. It is now time that Government fully integrates early years care and education as a societal 'public' responsibility and reflects this in investment and policy.

We hope that the rally will be a significant stepping stone towards achieving this transformation.

Our children only get one childhood, so it is crucially important that we get it right for them and for their families. Marian Quinn is Chairperson of the Association of Childhood Professionals.

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Irish Times, Feb 18 2015

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Irish Examiner, Feb 18 2015

Low-paid creche workers demand respect from Government ^[7]
Irish Times, Feb 18 2015

Expensive childcare is leading to an increase in underpaid au pairs in Ireland ^[8]
The Journal.ie, Feb 17 2015

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Report: 'Childcare' Business or profession and other Start Strong reports ^[9]

Website: Start Strong ^[10]

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