



Comptroller and Auditor General
Report on Value for Money Examination

Department of Education and Science

Educational Disadvantage Initiatives in the Primary Sector

June 2006

© Government of Ireland 2006

This report was prepared on the basis of information, documentation and explanations obtained from the public bodies referred to in the report. The draft report was sent to the Department of Education and Science, the Health Service Executive, the National Educational Welfare Board and the Education Research Centre. Where appropriate, the comments received were incorporated in the final version of the report.

Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General

Educational Disadvantage Initiatives in the Primary Sector

I have, in accordance with the provisions of Section 9 of the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act, 1993, carried out a value for money examination on educational disadvantage initiatives in the primary sector.

I hereby submit my report on the above examination for presentation to Dáil Éireann pursuant to Section 11 of the said Act.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Purcell', with a large circular flourish above the 'P'.

John Purcell
Comptroller and Auditor General

7 June 2006

Table of Contents

	Page
Summary of Findings	8
Educational Disadvantage Initiatives in the Primary Sector	
1 Introduction	13
2 Targeting Disadvantage Funding	16
3 Application of Disadvantage Resources	29
4 Addressing Disadvantage	37
5 Effectiveness of Disadvantage Initiatives	49
Appendices	
A Summary of Submissions to the Minister from the Educational Disadvantage Committee	61
B Views of Principals on Sources and Effects of Disadvantage	63
C Membership and Terms of Reference of the Advisory Board	64
D Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools	65
E Resources of School Completion Programme, 2003-2004	67
F Mandate and Strategy of the National Educational Welfare Board	69

Abbreviations

BTC	Breaking the Cycle
DAS	Disadvantaged Areas Scheme
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
EDC	Educational Disadvantage Committee
ERC	Education Research Centre
EWO	Educational Welfare Officer
GCEB	Giving Children and Even Break
HSCL	Home-School-Community Liaison
HSE	Health Service Executive
JLO	Juvenile Liaison Officer
NAER	National Assessment of English Reading
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NEWB	National Educational Welfare Board
RAPID	Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development
SCP	School Completion Programme

Summary of Findings

Summary of Findings

Four main initiatives to address social and economic impediments to educational attainment by primary school pupils were introduced over the past two decades. Under the initiatives, resources are provided for interventions at the level of schools, pupils, families and the wider community. €1.8m was made available for the school year 2003-2004.

Development of the Schemes

The four initiatives were gradually introduced commencing with a Disadvantaged Areas Scheme in 1984 which initially covered 33 schools in areas of high deprivation. This scheme was gradually extended as additional resources became available. To cater for liaison between the school, home and community, coordinators were appointed from 1990 onwards. A Breaking the Cycle Initiative introduced in 1996 and covering 152 schools was, in 2001, subsumed into another scheme – Giving Children an Even Break. Finally in 2002 a cluster-based School Completion Programme was introduced designed to combat early school leaving.

Relative disadvantage is assessed by reference to certain criteria like accommodation status, medical card entitlement and parental unemployment. Different qualifying criteria were used for each scheme and by the time of this examination the picture presented was one of a patchwork of schemes each attempting to address aspects of disadvantage. The Department has begun a consolidation process with the introduction of a new Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme from 2006 onwards.

Examination and Scope

The examination set out to establish

- how the specific resources were targeted, allocated and applied
- what is being done to address the consequences of disadvantage and identify opportunities for improved practice
- the extent to which the effectiveness of the initiatives was being evaluated.

Allocation and Application of Resources

The examination found that disadvantage resources were spread widely. Almost three quarters of all schools benefited to some extent from scheme resources. Schools that have relative disadvantage levels of less than 30% benefited from €7.9m of resources in the 2003-2004 school year. Any revised basis for allocating resources needs to ensure that the most disadvantaged pupils benefit proportionately from their use.

At school level, 84% of the total resources are provided in the form of teachers and home support liaison coordinators. The principal impact is on class size – though some schools visited applied the resources to learning support. The predominant use of additional teachers provided under the schemes to reduce class sizes reflected a general view that smaller classes were an effective means of countering disadvantage. At school level only 5% of cash grants were targeted at individual disadvantaged pupils. There would appear to be scope for better targeting in this area.

Apart from the impact of using different criteria to determine eligibility for the various disadvantage initiatives concerns also arose about the reliability of data used in the allocation process. Because the information is largely based on returns from schools - who do not have access to primary sources - it is

unlikely to be accurate. Alternative data collection methods need to be explored or more stringent validation put in place.

The School Completion Programme was not available to some schools with high levels of disadvantage – 25 schools that had relative disadvantage levels over 80% were not included in the programme. Within schools that participated in the programme a quota system was used. In schools with the highest levels of relative disadvantage the proportion of students included in the programme was only in the 19%-29% range. There is a need to review the selection process applied to individual pupils under the programme.

Good Practice

Overall, schools visited were applying the resources in an innovative fashion. Individual schools had found that certain interventions were successful in promoting literacy and encouraging attendance. The report outlines these interventions. While not all interventions are likely to be applicable in all contexts, it would be beneficial to provide some forum to exchange experiences on what worked well so that the lessons learned can be shared and applied more widely.

Operational Shortcomings

The examination would suggest that there is a need for greater coordination and joined up approaches among the agencies and personnel involved in addressing disadvantage.

In particular it was noted that

- Schools did not have dedicated lines of communication with Health Service staff, reports associated with referrals were not confidential and little feedback was received. The HSE accepts that coordination needs to be improved.
- In the area of absenteeism, the National Educational Welfare Board was not providing a comprehensive service to schools. The Board acknowledged that it was currently only prioritising children with the most significant levels of absenteeism and that it was still in the process of developing linkages and relationships with key agencies. There is a need to find a way in which the board can intervene in a more timely fashion before absenteeism begins to impact detrimentally on the capacity of the school to educate the pupils concerned.
- In the case of the schools visited the Home School Community Liaison service did not, in general, see itself as having a role in attendance. In addition, it found it difficult to elicit a response from some target families whether due to unavailability due to work commitments or incapacity due to substance abuse or alcohol. It also appears that, in some cases, links with other school personnel are sometimes hampered by a lack of opportunity to communicate mutual concerns. There appears to be a need to review the operation of this function in order to ensure that it works at maximum effectiveness.
- Some School Completion Programme clusters were unhappy with the level of support received from schools. There appears to be a need for guidelines on the relationship between clusters and schools.

Evaluating Impact

The impact of the initiatives can be assessed, in part, in terms of the rate of improvement in literacy and numeracy levels and absenteeism.

A 2004 national assessment found that standards of English reading had not changed since 1998 and that overall standards had not changed since 1980. In both 1998 and 2004, pupils in designated disadvantaged schools had significantly lower average scores than pupils in other schools with a slightly bigger gap in 2004 than in 1998.

Numeracy levels in disadvantaged schools are low relative to schools generally. A review of a selected number of disadvantaged schools in 2004 found that the results of 64% of their pupils fell in the bottom one fifth of pupils generally.

Bearing in mind the resources applied through the various disadvantage initiatives and the general increase in recent years in the financial allocations to the primary sector, it is disappointing that reading standards in designated disadvantaged schools have not improved.

A 2003 survey by the National Educational Welfare Board indicated that, at primary level, absenteeism in disadvantaged areas averaged 20 days out of a total of 183 schooldays with about one in four pupils absent for 20 days or more during 2003. There were no earlier figures with which to compare these results.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of future programmes to combat educational disadvantage it will be necessary to set targets for literacy, numeracy and attendance at both national and school level and to ensure that proper systems are put in place to collect the relevant data.

Educational Disadvantage Initiatives in the Primary Sector

1 Introduction

1.1 Educational disadvantage arises where there are impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent pupils from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools¹. Some of the principal symptoms of educational disadvantage include early school leaving, absenteeism, poor academic performance and behavioural difficulties.

1.2 Over the past two decades the Department of Education and Science (the Department) has introduced a range of specific measures to counter educational disadvantage. In addition, as part of their ongoing educational effort, schools attempt to address the effects of disadvantage using their mainline resources and budgets. This report examines those ongoing efforts and the utilisation of the specific funds devoted to combating educational disadvantage of which €1.8m was spent in the primary sector in the school year 2003-2004.

Background

1.3 The National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2001-2003, cited previous research by the Education Research Centre (ERC) which estimated that approximately 16% of the total school population may be regarded as educationally disadvantaged, taking into account literacy levels, early school leaving and experience of poverty.

1.4 The National Action Plan included an Educational Disadvantage Strategy which addressed prevention, early intervention and targeting. Advice in this area was to be provided by

- an Educational Disadvantage Committee (the EDC) which was set up to advise the Minister on policies and strategies to be adopted to identify and correct educational disadvantage — its membership is based on an expert rather than a representational model, including people from voluntary and other bodies who have particular experience in tackling educational disadvantage.
- an Educational Disadvantage Forum (the Forum) designed to have a much broader membership than the Committee was also established to advise the Minister on broader issues relating to educational disadvantage and exclusion from the full benefits of education.

1.5 The EDC held its first meeting in March 2002 and since then has met on a number of occasions and submitted reports to the Minister on a range of issues including the availability of a sufficient supply of teaching staff, the selection of schools for inclusion in schemes based on socio-economic data and the need for greater cooperation and coordination between State agencies. Appendix A outlines the main conclusions and recommendations of these submissions.

1.6 Subsequently, the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005 set specific targets for educational outcomes. These included objectives to

- halve the proportion of primary pupils with serious literacy difficulties by 2006
- reduce the number of young people who leave the school system early, so that the percentage of those who complete upper second level or equivalent would reach 85% by 2003 and 90% by 2006.

1 Education Act, 1998

Initiatives to Address Disadvantage

1.7 The Department provides funding to primary schools under four main initiatives designed to tackle the consequences of economic and social impediments to education

- A scheme to tackle disadvantage in designated areas (DAS)
- Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)
- Giving Children an Even Break (GCEB)²
- The School Completion Programme (SCP)

1.8 The focus of each disadvantage scheme is different with some schemes providing additional resources to the whole school, others placing more emphasis on targeting individual pupils while the HSCL focuses on providing support to parents and creating links with the community. Assistance is provided in two main ways, by providing additional staff for teaching, liaison and coordination and by making funding available to participating schools and to SCP clusters³.

Influence of Disadvantage

1.9 In general, disadvantaged pupils perform lower on literacy tests and do not attend school regularly. Principals in schools designated as disadvantaged also point to the existence among these pupils of serious issues in the areas of punctuality, general behaviour, concentration and esteem.

1.10 In regard to impediments to education, principals interviewed in the course of this examination suggest that apart from obvious factors like unemployment of parents and social problems in communities (drugs, violence and crime) much of disadvantage has its source in the home and derives from attitudes, expectations and lack of skills. A summary of their views is set out in Appendix B.

Responsibility and Accountability

1.11 The Social Inclusion Unit of the Department is responsible for policy, coordination of strategy and the administration of programmes relating to educational disadvantage at primary level. The funds and resources provided are managed at school level with the exception of the SCP which is organised on the basis of school clusters, comprising both primary and second level schools.

1.12 The Accounting Officer for the Department is accountable for the efficiency and effectiveness of the measures.

2 The GCEB initiative set up in 2001 included all 152 schools previously participating in a Breaking the Cycle Initiative (BTC) and these schools retained the existing benefits. For the purpose of the study, no distinction is made between the different strands of the GCEB initiative.

3 SCP is delivered through 82 clusters that provide additional supports to pupils in selected primary and post-primary schools.

Examination Scope and Objectives

1.13 The examination covers all disadvantage initiatives operated at primary school level. It did not examine the Early Start Scheme which operates at pre-school level. The examination set out to evaluate

- how the specific resources were targeted, allocated and applied
- what is being done to address the consequences of disadvantage and identify opportunities for improved practice
- the arrangements for evaluation of effectiveness.

1.14 The focus of this examination was on measures designed to combat the effects of economic and social impediments to education. The study did not examine the education of persons with special educational needs.

Examination Methodology

1.15 The examination was conducted by staff of the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The work carried out during the examination included the following main elements

- Interviews with personnel from the Department and other relevant organisations.
- Local reviews at 20 primary schools participating in the initiatives. The 20 schools were selected at random from a population of 189 schools in receipt of additional funding under all of the initiatives — DAS, HSCL, GCEB and SCP.
- Visits to five SCP clusters. SCP clusters were selected from among the clusters providing supports to the 20 schools visited.
- Review of papers provided by the Department.

1.16 An Advisory Board comprising experts in the area of educational disadvantage assisted in this examination, giving background advice on the measures adopted by the Department and assistance in the formation of the study approach and the interpretation of available data. The membership of the group is set out in Appendix C.

Structure of the Report

1.17 Chapter 2 examines how well the resources are targeted. Chapter 3 reviews how the resources were applied by schools and SCP clusters. Chapter 4 examines what is being done in relation to the major symptoms of disadvantage and identifies good practice opportunities and barriers to success based on the experience of personnel in schools and SCP coordinators. Chapter 5 considers arrangements for evaluating outcomes at national and local level.

Subsequent Developments

1.18 A new strategy to support disadvantaged schools Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), which incorporates both an integrated School Support Programme (SSP) and a standardised system for identifying and reviewing levels of disadvantage, is being implemented from 2006 onwards. Appendix D outlines its main features.

2 Targeting Disadvantage Funding

2.1 In the school year 2003-2004, approximately €1.8m was spent on initiatives specifically targeted at educational disadvantage in the primary sector. This chapter examines the background to the initiatives and how specific allocations were made by the Department.

Focus of the Disadvantage Measures

2.2 Each of the schemes attempts to address a different aspect of the relationship between the pupil, school, home and community.

- DAS provides additional teachers and grants on a whole-school basis.
- HSCL provides resources for liaison between schools, parents and the community for the same schools as are eligible for DAS.
- GCEB, incorporating the earlier Breaking the Cycle (BTC) initiative, provides grants in respect of pupils identified as disadvantaged. Additional teaching resources and rural coordinators are also provided to some of the schools under the scheme.
- SCP is a cluster-based system with 82 clusters providing a range of supports to targeted pupils in 299 primary schools. Each cluster is headed up by a coordinator and provides supports to pupils in a number of primary and post-primary schools.

History of the Measures

2.3 DAS was initially introduced in 1984 to address educational disadvantage in areas of deprivation, high crime, high unemployment, vandalism and poor accommodation. The scheme was limited to Dublin, Cork and Limerick and 33 schools were initially included. In 1990, DAS was expanded and schools were ranked according to specific criteria, as outlined in Figure 2.2. At that time, schools with the highest levels of disadvantage were designated disadvantaged. Further schools were designated disadvantaged in 1993, 1994 and 1996. The number of schools selected in any year was dependent on the resources available. Currently, 311 schools are designated disadvantaged⁴.

2.4 From 1990 onwards, schools designated disadvantaged for the purpose of DAS were also included in a HSCL initiative. Currently, there are 311 primary schools included in the HSCL. The main focus of the scheme was to increase links between the school, the home and the wider community in order to promote the educational interest of the pupil. The scheme is delivered through a coordinator who is assigned to a school or a group of schools.

2.5 The BTC initiative was launched in 1996 and was in response to a study carried out jointly by the Combat Poverty Agency and the ERC. The report had reviewed approaches to identification of, and support for, pupils with disadvantaged backgrounds. Schools were identified on the basis of revised criteria as recommended in the report. The main focus of the BTC scheme was a reduction in class size in urban schools and the provision of grants for materials, equipment and local projects in both urban and rural schools. 32 urban schools and 120 rural schools were selected for inclusion in the BTC scheme.

2.6 The GCEB initiative was introduced in 2001 and resources were allocated based on the results of a survey of school principals carried out by the ERC in 2000. Grants were targeted at individual pupils and

⁴ An additional 114 rural schools included in BTC receive supplementary grants on the same basis as DAS schools but are not designated disadvantaged.

a special per capita grant was payable in respect of pupils identified as disadvantaged. 200⁵ additional teachers were allocated to the most disadvantaged schools. Schools already in receipt of resources under existing schemes retained those entitlements.

2.7 When the SCP was introduced in 2002, selected schools at primary and post-primary level that form an educational community network serving areas with the highest levels of early school leaving were invited to participate in the programme. The focus of the SCP is on those who are at risk of leaving school early and not obtaining a Leaving Certificate.

Distribution of Initiative Funding

2.8 Before GCEB was introduced, city schools were much better represented in DAS than schools in other locations with almost half of city schools having designated status. Large towns on the other hand had only 19% of their schools designated as disadvantaged. After the introduction of GCEB, while there was some improvement in the relative position of pupils in non-city schools, there remained a strong city bias. 43% of pupils in city schools attend schools with significant resources for disadvantage as opposed to 15%-20% in other locations.

Distribution of Disadvantage

2.9 A 1995 report⁶ by the ERC attempted to estimate the geographical distribution of educational disadvantage. The report estimated that disadvantage was distributed as follows

Areas with population less than 10,000 and rural areas ⁷	61%
Dublin and Dun Laoghaire	25%
Towns with populations of between 10,000 and 40,000	10%
Other urban areas ⁸	4%

This estimation of the distribution of disadvantage was again used in the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2001-2003.

2.10 In 2005, the ERC used data from the National Assessment of English Reading (NAER) in conjunction with medical card entitlement in order to estimate the distribution of disadvantage⁹ by location. It concluded on the basis of this analysis that there was no evidence to suggest disadvantage is more prevalent in cities than in other locations. However, the report acknowledged that it is possible that, despite there being no difference in overall rates, heavier concentrations of disadvantage may be found in some schools in cities. Also, the analysis was conducted on relatively small samples and the ERC suggested further research in order to assess the geographical distribution of disadvantage more accurately.

5 This had increased to 249 in 2003-2004.

6 The report was based on data from a 1993 national reading survey, administered to a national sample of pupils in fifth class in primary schools.

7 Around two-thirds of people in this category lived in the countryside.

8 Other urban areas included Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford cities.

9 For this purpose, a pupil was defined as disadvantaged if his/her parents had a medical card and the pupil scored at least one standard deviation below the mean on a reading test.

2.11 The Department informed me that the results of the process followed to select the 25 most disadvantaged urban and rural areas in the country for the RAPID 1 initiative¹⁰, launched in 2001, would support the view that cities have heavier concentrations of disadvantage than other locations. 22 of the 25 areas selected for RAPID 1 are in the urban areas of Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Waterford while the remaining three are in Dundalk, Drogheda, and Wicklow town.

2.12 In regard to the relationship between disadvantage and academic performance, the Department informed me that analysis carried out in 2005 by the ERC prior to the formulation of DEIS has demonstrated that disadvantage is a significantly stronger predictor of low academic achievement in the case of urban/town schools than in the case of rural schools. For a variety of reasons, mostly related to testing constraints, only limited data is available on achievement in rural schools at present. It is proposed to address this by carrying out a more structured programme of standardised testing in rural primary schools participating in the DEIS initiative over the next two to three years.

Levels of Disadvantage

2.13 The ERC conducted a survey of primary schools in 2000. Each school was surveyed to establish the proportion of pupils fulfilling certain criteria. These criteria included the incidence of unemployment, lone parents, medical card entitlement, living in local authority housing and claiming the free book grant. An indicative percentage was derived based on the aggregation of individual scores for each criterion¹¹. The results were used to enable the Department to rank schools in terms of their relative levels of disadvantage.

2.14 Almost all schools benefiting from the disadvantage initiatives then in operation took part in the survey. The survey showed that while disadvantage existed in all responding schools there was a high degree of variation in the levels arising.

2.15 Figure 2.1 shows how relative levels of disadvantage calculated on the basis of this indicative percentage would be distributed when applied to the 2003-2004 enrolment in the 2,345 schools¹² which had responded to the survey held in 2000.

10 RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development) is a Government initiative under the aegis of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs which targets 45 of the most disadvantaged areas in the country. Strand I targets 25 urban areas while Strand II targets 20 provincial towns.

11 The ERC has indicated that this percentage cannot be regarded as an indicator of the absolute level of disadvantage. It is a crude indicator of the level of disadvantage in each school relative to other schools.

12 Approximately 80% of all primary schools.

Figure 2.1 Relative levels of disadvantage in primary schools, 2003-2004

Relative level of disadvantage	Number of schools	Total pupils enrolled
0% — 10%	596	92,511
11% — 20%	542	73,235
21% — 30%	379	59,859
31% — 40%	260	34,173
41% — 50%	207	29,678
51% — 60%	144	17,370
61% — 70%	102	14,847
71% — 80%	67	9,419
81% — 90%	37	4,597
91% — 100%	11	736
	2,345	336,425

2.16 The results show that, assuming the 2000 findings continued to pertain, when compared with other responding schools, 361 schools had disadvantage levels in excess of 50% in 2003-2004. Almost half of the schools who responded had disadvantage levels of between zero and 20% in relative terms.

Identification of Schools

2.17 The earliest intervention (DAS) was initially limited to areas of deprivation in Dublin, Cork and Limerick. However, identification based on national surveys began in 1990.

2.18 The Department has conducted a number of exercises to establish the relative levels of disadvantage prevailing in individual schools. At different times, it has used different criteria to identify disadvantaged pupils and schools. In gathering the relevant information, it relies on the principals of individual schools to provide data on the pupils in their school.

2.19 Socio-economic indicators have been used as the main indicators of disadvantage. However, the Department has, over the years, used different indicators of disadvantage and has attached different weight to individual criteria.

2.20 In each of these exercises, points were calculated for each school on the basis of the number of pupils estimated by principals to fulfil specific criteria. The criteria used for each exercise and the relative weight attached to them are shown in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2 Criteria used to identify disadvantage, 1990-2005

Criteria	DAS	BTC	BTC	GCEB	GCEB	DEIS
	HSCCL 1990	Urban 1996	Rural 1996	Urban 2000	Rural 2000	Urban & Rural 2005
Parents unemployed	40%	17%	22%	25%	28%	16.7%
Accommodation	30%	17%	—	25%	—	16.7%
Medical card	20%	25%	22%	25%	29%	—
Lone parent household	—	8%	12%	12.5%	—	16.7%
Assistance due to limited means from farm income	—	—	22%	—	29%	—
Free books grant	—	—	—	12.5%	14%	16.7%
Inspector assessment	10%	—	—	—	—	—
Parental education	—	17%	22%	—	—	—
School plan	—	16%	—	—	—	—
Travellers	—	—	—	—	—	16.7%
Large families (5 or more children)	—	—	—	—	—	16.7%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total points available	1,000	1,200	900	800	700	600

2.21 The Department informed me that a new standardised system of identification has been adopted under DEIS and will replace all of the previous arrangements for identifying schools for participation in initiatives to address educational disadvantage. This will streamline and rationalise the previous arrangements with regard to identifying schools for participation in educational disadvantage initiatives.

Opportunities to Improve Targeting

2.22 While the introduction of a standardised identification system from 2006 will help address the differing methods of allocation, there is also a need to examine the quality of the data used within the identification system. Heretofore, the system of allocation of resources took account of different criteria and priorities relating to four initiatives which were developed over a long period of time. In the future, opportunities may exist to adopt a more focused approach and improve targeting. Areas which may merit attention include

- criteria used to identify disadvantage
- use of up-to-date information
- the quality of the data.

Criteria to identify disadvantage

2.23 As indicated in Figure 2.2, resources under each scheme have been allocated using different criteria to identify disadvantage. Major debates relate to whether educational attainment measures should be included and how to take account of the impact of social context especially around the incidence of disadvantage in rural and urban settings and the use of cut-off thresholds¹³.

2.24 The ERC recommended in 1995 and again in 1999, that educational, as well as socio-economic, criteria should be taken into account in selecting schools. While educational criteria have always been used in the selection procedure at post-primary level, measures of educational achievement have not been included in selection criteria at primary level. The ERC concluded that further analysis of the

13 These debates are set out in ERC reports in 1995, 1999 and 2005.

relationship between medical card possession and achievement at individual and school level would be worthwhile before making a decision on this matter.

2.25 The 2005 ERC study also found that there were no major differences between the socio-economic profiles immediately above and immediately below the cut-off thresholds being used in the Department's allocation decisions. It instanced one school with a relative disadvantage percentage of 44.9% which had additional teachers allocated in order to achieve a reduced class size under GCEB while another school with a relative disadvantage percentage of 44.4% did not benefit from reduced class sizes. In addition, some of the schools just below the cut-off threshold had failed to answer key questions thus reducing their levels of disadvantage for allocation purposes.

2.26 This problem was exacerbated when participation in schemes was used to allocate additional resources under other schemes. For example, schools that got additional teachers under GCEB got additional learning support teachers also.

2.27 The Department informed me that research carried out by the ERC found strong evidence for the proposition that disadvantage associated with poverty and social exclusion assumes a multiplier effect when large numbers of pupils in a school are from a similar disadvantaged background (the social context effect). This research provides the rationale for targeting schools with a high concentration of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds for particular support and, hence, the rationale for the use of cut-off thresholds.

Allocation of resources on most up to date information

2.28 Factors such as unemployment, medical card entitlement and the numbers of lone parents have been used consistently as indicators of disadvantage since 1984¹⁴. Nationally, there have been significant variations in the incidence of these factors. The level of unemployment has fallen from 15.4% in 1984 to 4.4% in 2004. In the period 1994 to 2004, the numbers of individuals entitled to medical cards has decreased by 10%¹⁵. The number of lone parents has increased over the period.

2.29 While, nationally, there have been significant movements in these indicators of disadvantage, the level of change occurring in individual schools may not be uniform as the demographics of particular areas change over the years. This would suggest that there is a need for procedures to identify schools that are experiencing changes in their socio-economic profiles and to alter the funding provided accordingly.

2.30 The funds allocated under the GCEB initiative (approximately €14.9m in 2003-2004) were allocated on the basis of a survey of school principals in 2000. However, this information was not used to re-direct the resources under the DAS, BTC and HSCL schemes (approximately €37.5m in 2003-2004). The decisions on which schools would be included in DAS, BTC and HSCL initiatives had been made many years earlier — in 1984, 1990, 1994 and 1996. Once schools had been designated disadvantaged and included in those schemes, stability in the level of disadvantage was assumed and, generally, the initial schools identified for inclusion in the schemes retained their entitlements and no other schools were added.

2.31 My examination noted that if the more recent information had been used to allocate resources for the older schemes there might be scope for more equitable allocation. For instance, 97 of the 425 schools in the DAS and HSCL schemes had relative disadvantage levels of less than 40% in the 2000 survey. On the other hand, there were 56 schools with relative disadvantage levels over 60% which were not

¹⁴ Medical card data were not, however, used in the 2005 assessment.

¹⁵ It is acknowledged that there are a number of factors impacting on medical card entitlement including extension on age grounds and relatively static eligibility thresholds.

included in the earlier DAS and HSCL initiatives. However, it must be borne in mind that the weighting of factors also changed as indicated in Figure 2.2.

2.32 The introduction of a standardised basis of allocation for all schemes under DEIS should address the issue of up-to-date information provided that information is reviewed periodically.

Improving data quality

2.33 Disadvantage levels are calculated from survey forms completed by school principals. Some schools do not return survey forms at all. The response rate for the ERC survey in 2000 was about 80%. Some principals skip important questions on the survey form thus reducing the points allocated and the disadvantage percentage calculated. Data in respect of the socio-economic profile of primary level pupils and their parents are not readily available in schools. Hence, principals estimate the number of pupils in particular categories, for instance, the number of pupils whose parents are unemployed or are entitled to a medical card. Limited validation was carried out on the information returned in the 2000 survey.

2.34 Data provided by parents in respect of medical card possession for the purpose of the National Assessment of English Reading in fifth class in 1999 and the National Assessment of Mathematics in fourth class in 1999 was compared with the estimates of medical card possession provided by the principals for the purpose of the GCEB survey in 2000¹⁶.

2.35 It was noted that principals had reported higher overall levels of medical card possession than parents and the difference was greatest in city schools. The analysis showed that, nationally, principals estimated 39% of pupils were entitled to a medical card. The data provided by the parents showed a rate of medical card entitlement of between 25% and 28%. In cities, the variation was even greater with principals estimating that 46.5% of pupils were entitled to a medical card when the data provided by parents showed a rate of medical card entitlement ranging from 22% to 28%¹⁷.

2.36 An EDC submission to the Minister in March 2003 considered that there may be scope for analysing socio-economic data available in electronic form in other departments in order to more accurately calculate disadvantage levels. Information on the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, available in the Department of Social and Family Affairs, and entitlement to medical cards, available in the Health Service Executive (HSE), would yield useful data on the levels of disadvantage arising in individual schools.

2.37 In addition, the submission identified a more long-term approach involving further cooperation between the Department and the Department of Social and Family Affairs extending to the recording of school roll numbers where a benefit or allowance is being claimed in respect of a child.

2.38 The Department considers that pending the development of a comprehensive primary school database, surveying school principals in relation to levels of socio-economic disadvantage in their schools is currently the most effective method available for identifying disadvantage. The data collected in the most recent survey carried out by the ERC¹⁸ in 2005 to support the implementation of the DEIS action plan were subject to a detailed quality assurance process.

2.39 The recent DEIS action plan provided that the identification process would be assisted by an advisory group and that quality assurance work would be coordinated through the Department's regional offices and the Inspectorate. Following initial analysis work on the questionnaire returns, a quality

16 This was carried out as part of a review by the ERC in 2004.

17 The extent to which these differences are due to under reporting by parents or overestimation by principals is not clear.

18 The ERC surveyed all primary schools (other than special schools) in May 2005 and a response rate of more than 97% was achieved.

assurance process led by the ERC and involving the Department's regional offices and Inspectorate got underway in December 2005. Feedback was sought and received on the initial findings for each region. In addition, the Social Inclusion Unit and HSCL/SCP national coordinators assisted the ERC by identifying and documenting potential anomalies. About 900 questionnaire returns were checked by the ERC during the quality assurance process.

2.40 The Department has informed me that it plans to move away from principals' surveys, insofar as possible, for future identification processes. The development of a new Primary Pupils' Database, and the recording of the PPSN of every primary pupil should facilitate cooperation with other departments to allow for more accurate calculation of disadvantage levels.

Form of Resource Provision

2.41 Resources are provided to schools in two main ways — through allocations of personnel and through cash grants. In 2003-2004 about €2.4m was provided to primary schools. €4.2m (84%) of this expenditure was to meet the cost of staff provided under the various initiatives and €8.2m (16%) was provided in grants to schools.

Personnel allocations

2.42 A total of 848 staff was provided under the initiatives in the school year 2003-2004. 616 teachers have been provided under the DAS and GCEB initiatives and 174 coordinators are provided under the HSCL initiative. 58 rural coordinators are provided under the GCEB initiative (formerly BTC) to provide support to 252 rural schools. The allocation of staff under the various initiatives and the associated costs are shown in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3 Personnel provided under disadvantage initiatives, 2003-2004

Scheme	Additional posts provided (WTE)	Estimated cost of personnel ^a (€m)	Number of Schools
DAS	294	17.8	243
GCEB	380	15.8	403
HSCL	174	10.6	305
Total	848	44.2	575^b

Notes:

- a The cost of additional posts is estimated based on actual salary costs plus an additional 18.5% for employers PRSI and pension.
- b 575 schools either have additional teaching posts and/or have a HSCL coordinator or rural coordinator attached to the school.

2.43 In regard to the application of 84% of resources in the form of teachers and coordinators the Department has informed me that the policy of providing the bulk of resources in this form is supported by the current international emphasis on multi-faceted approaches to tackling disadvantage. The ERC has argued that these multi-faceted approaches should comprise the following elements

- curriculum adaptation at primary and post-primary levels, paying particular attention to literacy and numeracy
- smaller classes, particularly in the early grades, to facilitate individual attention and the development of relationships between teacher and pupils
- a high degree of parental involvement in the educational process, both in their own homes and in schools

- the reform of school organisation to develop a unity of purpose and build on existing strengths of teachers and pupils
- adequate financial resources for schools to operate comfortably and
- a high level of involvement of other community agencies.

2.44 The Department noted that many of these elements require a significant input of human resources and this applies both to programmes in Ireland and those adopted internationally.

Grant allocations

2.45 In addition to the provision of resources by way of teachers and coordinators, cash grants are also made available to schools. The amounts provided by way of grants under each scheme, together with the basis of the funding are outlined in Figure 2.4.

Figure 2.4 Cash grants under disadvantage initiatives, 2003-2004

Scheme	Amount €m	No. of schools	Basis of Funding
DAS	2.4	425 ^a	€20.31 supplementary capitation and €11.43 for classroom materials and equipment per pupil enrolled.
HSCL	0.6	425 ^a	A portion of the payment made under DAS €6.35 per pupil is designated to fund HSCL activities (€0.5m). The balance €0.1m relates to grants made to schools to fund part-time HSCL personnel.
GCEB ^b	5.2	2,345	€63.49 in respect of each pupil identified as disadvantaged in the school with a minimum payment of €952.30 per school.
Payments to Schools	8.2	2,350^c	

Notes:

- a 311 schools are designated disadvantaged. An additional 114 rural schools included in the BTC receive supplementary grants on the same basis as DAS schools but are not designated disadvantaged.
- b €0.6m is provided under the BTC initiative.
- c 2,350 primary schools benefit by way of a direct grant to the school.

2.46 In addition to the staff and grants provided directly to individual schools, 299 primary schools benefited under SCP in 2003-2004. The total value of the resources provided is estimated at €9.4m for that year.

Impact of allocation policy

2.47 Resources to tackle disadvantage are spread widely across all schools. Overall, 72% of schools (accounting for 77% of pupils) benefit to some degree from funding under the disadvantage initiatives. However, the bulk of the funds involved are directed towards supporting schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage. The Department informed me that the approach taken in GCEB had been to target those schools which had the highest levels of disadvantage but also to tackle dispersed disadvantage. Under GCEB, schools with the highest levels of disadvantage are in receipt of additional teaching and financial resources, while, at the same time, grants are provided to about 1,700 other schools to tackle dispersed disadvantage.

2.48 As a result of this allocation policy, schools receive varying levels of resources depending on the initiatives for which they qualify. Of the schools who receive resources, 41% get less than €1,000¹⁹. At

19 Weir, 2004, suggests that some of the schools that receive €1,000 are small schools with high concentrations of disadvantage.

the other end of the spectrum, 314 schools (13% of schools getting assistance) receive resources in excess of €50,000. Figure 2.5 relates the funding bands to schools.

Figure 2.5 Disadvantage resources per school, 2003-2004

Resource Bands €	Number of schools	Number of pupils	Percentage of schools	Percentage of pupils
No funding	918	99,032	28.0	22.5
Less than 1,000	972	81,772	29.6	18.6
1,000 - 5,000	642	114,843	19.6	26.1
5,001 - 10,000	121	30,601	3.7	7.0
10,001 - 50,000	316	43,447	9.6	9.9
50,001 - 100,000	61	10,815	1.8	2.5
100,001 - 200,000	174	35,389	5.3	8.0
Over 200,000	79	23,811	2.4	5.4
	3,283	439,710	100%	100%

Potential resources available for disadvantaged pupils

2.49 Pupils identified as disadvantaged may potentially benefit from allocations made for the benefit of their school and additionally, from resources available to tackle individual disadvantage. In 2003-2004, approximately €36.0m (58% of the total) was provided for application on a whole school basis leaving €14.6m (24%) potentially available to address individual disadvantage. However, in practice a high proportion of these resources are also applied on a whole school basis. The remaining 18% was provided for HSCL activities. The breakdown, by initiative, of the overall resources between whole school, HSCL and discretionary resources is shown in Figure 2.6.

Figure 2.6 Whole school and discretionary resources, 2003-2004

Initiative	Whole School €m	Discretionary €m	HSCL €m	Total €m
DAS	20.2	—	—	20.2
HSCL	—	—	11.2	11.2
GCEB ^a	15.8	5.2	—	21.0
Amounts provided directly to individual schools	36.0	5.2	11.2	52.4
SCP	—	9.4	—	9.4
Total	36.0	14.6	11.2	61.8

Note:

a Includes amounts provided under the BTC initiative

Allocation of SCP Resources

2.50 The School Completion Programme is organised in 82 clusters. Each cluster includes a number of primary and post-primary schools (between two and twelve) and is headed up by a coordinator. The cluster coordinator works with the individual schools to identify pupils in need of additional support under the programme (the SCP target group) and manages the delivery of these supports. The focus of this activity is to develop local strategies to ensure maximum educational participation by young people who may be at risk of early school leaving. They pursue this objective by

- providing extra supports for pupils with learning and behavioural difficulties
- attempting to enhance the educational experience of children in the target group

- attempting to compensate for lack of support in the child's home
- collaborating with other agencies, the school, social workers and community based agencies to ensure that they work together for the greater benefit of the child.

Selection of schools

2.51 SCP provides support to 299 primary schools. Participation in SCP is determined by the extent of early school leaving in post-primary schools. While there may not necessarily be a straightforward relationship between disadvantage at primary level and retention rates at second level, the proportion of schools selected for inclusion in SCP was examined by reference to the relative level of disadvantage in the school. Figure 2.7 sets out the position in this regard.

Figure 2.7 Proportion of schools included in SCP by disadvantage level, 2003-2004

Relative level of disadvantage	Number of schools	Schools in SCP	Proportion of schools in SCP
0% - 10%	596	11	2%
11% - 20%	542	32	6%
21% - 30%	379	35	9%
31% - 40%	260	25	10%
41% - 50%	207	44	21%
51% - 60%	144	33	23%
61% - 70%	102	51	50%
71% - 80%	67	30	45%
81% - 90%	37	21	57%
91%-100%	11	2	18%
Total	2,345^a	284^b	12%

Notes:

- a Only those schools that replied to the ERC survey in 2000 (approximately 80% of all primary schools) are included in this analysis. The disadvantage level in the remaining 20% are unknown.
- b SCP provides support to 299 primary schools. However, 15 of these schools had not replied to the ERC survey in 2000 and, as a result, the disadvantage level in the school is unknown. Those schools have been excluded from this analysis.

2.52 The results suggest that 62% of schools with relative disadvantage levels over 50% are not included in the SCP. However, just over one quarter of the primary schools in SCP have relative disadvantage levels under 30%.

2.53 The Department informed me that the new standardised system of identification under DEIS will address this issue with all schools selected for support under disadvantage measures now being selected on the same basis.

Allocation of funding between clusters

2.54 The criteria used by the Department to determine the funding allocation for individual SCP projects include the cost of the local coordinator, the number of schools, the number of targeted pupils, the level of disadvantage and the supports to be implemented. The 82 projects encompass a wide range of settings and circumstances, each with its own particular needs, with the objective being to cater for the specific needs of the target group in each case.

2.55 In the year 2003-2004, there were large variations in the total amounts sought from the Department by SCP clusters — amounts ranged from €74,800 to €362,100. The Retention Plans are submitted to the National Coordinator and in most cases the amounts sought in the plan are granted. The

planned expenditure for each target pupil varied from €248 per pupil to €3,285 per pupil in individual clusters.

2.56 The Department noted that personnel costs can vary significantly depending on qualifications and experience. Some supports such as counselling and therapeutic interventions can be expensive and require the involvement of professionally qualified experts. If a project decides to provide intensive supports to a small number of targeted pupils, this will be reflected in the cost per pupil. Some projects have an out of school component which caters for young people who have left the education system.

2.57 It explained that out of school activities incur higher per capita running costs, as the young people involved need a higher level of support. They may need intensive one to one tuition, may have behavioural problems and some may be involved in criminal activity. Per capita costs for children in this category attending Youth Encounter Projects were about €21,000 in 2004.

2.58 No exercises have been conducted to justify the higher than average expenditure per pupil in some clusters. It would be useful for the national coordinator to benchmark expenditure by pupil across the clusters and examine the reasons and justification for high expenditure per pupil supported under SCP.

Conclusions

Disadvantage funding was made available to four main initiatives aimed at addressing the symptoms of disadvantage. The examination found, however, that there was scope for improving their complementarity and increasing the efficiency of the targeting as set out below.

- The study found that schemes to tackle disadvantage had evolved over the past 20 years resulting in a situation where there were a variety of schemes based on different eligibility criteria.

In order to ensure a more equitable distribution of funds it is desirable to base allocations on a standardised system for identifying disadvantaged pupils.

- At this point resources are spread quite widely with 72% of all schools benefiting in one way or another from the measures. Schools that have disadvantage levels of less than 30% benefited from €7.9m of resources.

Any revised basis for allocating resources needs to ensure that the most disadvantaged pupils benefit proportionately from their use.

- There are concerns over the accuracy of the data used to calculate disadvantage levels. Lack of validation and not following up incomplete responses militated against the building up of a comprehensive picture of disadvantage for aid purposes. In addition, cut-off procedures may have impacted unfairly on schools just below the eligibility thresholds.

Alternative collection methods need to be explored and validation exercises carried out on data supplied by schools. In addition, priority should be given to the development of a comprehensive primary schools database to facilitate improved allocation of funds and the tracking of performance.

- Some schools with high levels of disadvantage are not included in SCP. 25 schools with disadvantage levels in excess of 80% were not included in SCP.

The relationship between SCP participation and disadvantage levels should be investigated and in particular the correlation between disadvantage in primary schools and dropout rates in their associated second level schools.

The Department has commenced addressing these issues with effect from 2006 under its new DEIS action plan.

3 Application of Disadvantage Resources

3.1 After allocations have been made by the Department, choices are made by schools and SCP clusters as to how the resources should be applied. This chapter examines the outcome of those decisions informed by a local review at 20 schools and five SCP clusters.

Deployment of Personnel at School Level

3.2 616 additional teachers were provided to 301 primary schools in 2003-2004 under the DAS and GCEB initiatives.

3.3 The Department has set a class size of 29 for primary schools generally. The GCEB initiative (into which the BTC initiative was subsumed) provides additional teaching resources to some schools in order to lower class sizes in the schools participating in the scheme. For those schools participating in BTC the maximum class size is 15 for junior classes and 27 for senior classes. The maximum class sizes for those schools participating in GCEB²⁰ is 20 in junior classes and 27 in senior classes. Some schools in the DAS scheme qualify for one or two concessionary posts depending on the size of the school.

3.4 For the purpose of the examination, the 20 schools visited were examined to establish how the additional teachers were used, the level of autonomy in making this decision and the school's assessment of the effectiveness of this approach.

3.5 43 additional teachers were allocated to the 20 schools surveyed. 41 of these posts had been filled. 35 of the teachers were used as mainstream teachers in order to create smaller classes. The remaining six were used to provide additional learning support as the schools were happy with the class sizes in operation.

3.6 In regard to the application of most posts as mainstream teachers, principals said that although they had discretion in the application of these posts they felt this was the best use of the posts for the following reasons

- Smaller classes were seen as beneficial in addressing disadvantage because it was easier for the teacher to get around to individual pupils and it allowed for different teaching methods especially group work tailored to the needs of individuals in the group.
- There is often no real choice in the application of the posts where the school must comply with a maximum class size set by the Department. Teachers are allocated on the basis of total enrolment and a stated pupil/teacher ratio. Depending on the age profile of the pupils, this may result in a situation where there are too many pupils in specific classes or mixed classes. While mixing of classes are a characteristic of small rural schools and are not, generally, seen as a problem in those schools, the principals stated that mixed classes present difficulty when a small number of pupils from one class are included with a much larger number from another.

Application of cash grants

3.7 The application of grants was established through examination of accounts and invoices and discussion with the principal and the HSCL coordinator. Figure 3.1 contrasts the allocation and subsequent application of grants at individual school level for the 20 schools visited.

20 The reduced class size applies only in the 128 schools that qualified for additional posts under the GCEB Initiative.

Figure 3.1 Allocation and application of grants in schools visited, 2003-2004

Designation at allocation	Funding €	Actual Application			
		Disadvantage initiatives whole school	Disadvantage initiatives targeted	HSCL activities	Running Costs
Whole School ^a	165,673	102,933	—	—	62,740
HSCL	33,145	—	—	33,145	—
Discretionary ^b	102,973	84,360	15,706	—	2,907
Total	301,791	187,293	15,706	33,145	65,647

Notes:

- a Includes grants provided under DAS in respect of materials and supplementary capitation.
 b This indicates that the amount provided is potentially available to address individual disadvantage and includes grants provided under GCEB and BTC.

3.8 Overall, in the schools visited 62% of grants were applied across the board — benefiting classes or the whole school and 22% went on running expenses. Only 5% was targeted within schools at individual disadvantaged pupils with the balance (11%) applied through the HSCL initiative which prioritises the most disadvantaged parents in the community for support.

3.9 While Figure 3.1 shows the overall position for the 20 schools there was considerable variation in how the additional funding was applied in the schools visited.

- Six schools spent all of their disadvantage grants (including the supplementary capitation provided under the DAS Initiative) on disadvantage initiatives.
- Ten schools used the supplementary capitation portion of the DAS grant to contribute to general running costs and the remainder of the disadvantage grants were applied on disadvantage interventions.
- As well as using supplementary capitation, two schools used a proportion of other disadvantage grants to cover general running costs.
- On the other hand, two schools spent about two and a half times the amounts granted on interventions in the area of disadvantage. The source of the funds in these cases was fundraising and the proceeds of the rental of premises.

3.10 The Department noted that the extent and nature of individual targeting which takes place in any given situation has to be determined locally at school cluster, school or classroom level. Guidelines and in-service provided by the Department and its support services to schools and school clusters emphasise the need to target those pupils most in need through the HSCL and SCP programmes. While the targeting of individual disadvantaged pupils for particular supports is an important requirement, this has to be balanced with seeking to ensure that supports do not have the unintended consequence of labelling or stigmatising pupils.

3.11 It also noted that schools in disadvantaged areas do not have the same access to financial resources as other schools, such as fundraising, parental contributions and such schools may have higher running costs, with particular reference to the cost of insurance and security. The additional financial resources provided by the Department are intended both to assist in meeting the running costs of the school and to provide resources for targeted educational supports.

3.12 An evaluation of the GCEB, carried out by the ERC in 2005, included a question to schools in relation to specific targeting of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds for additional supports. The Department confirmed that analysis of this material will be completed over the coming months and will inform future policy development in this area.

Types of interventions by schools

3.13 When grants applied on disadvantage in the 20 schools visited were further analysed, the funding was found to have been applied to a wide variety of interventions. Figure 3.2 shows the distribution of the expenditure on disadvantage initiatives in the schools surveyed.

Figure 3.2 Breakdown of expenditure, 2003-2004

	Proportion
Teaching aids	28%
Drama, music, dance	12%
Trips	12%
IT	10%
Sports	7%
Parents' courses and parents' room facilities	7%
Art materials	6%
Other	18%
Total	100%

3.14 In the schools examined, it was noted that priorities and, therefore, the application of disadvantage grants tended to change from year to year. For example, two schools examined had supplemented their existing IT grants with disadvantage grants in order to build up their IT capacity. They would expect expenditure on IT in the following year to be reduced. Similarly, one school had spent large amounts on books in the previous three years and, consequently, very little in the year examined as they felt they had amassed a sufficient supply of books which only needed to be maintained. Accordingly, the application of the grants in the schools surveyed is representative only of the priorities identified in those schools in that year.

Management of grant funding

3.15 Each Board of Management is expected to ensure that all moneys provided to the school under the various disadvantage initiatives are made available for the purchase of appropriate resources and materials.

3.16 During the visits to primary schools, information was sought on the systems in place to administer moneys received from the Department. It was found that

- In eight schools all income and expenditure of the school was processed and accounted for through a single bank account controlled by its Board of Management.
- 12 schools had more than one bank account. While all money received from the Department is lodged to one main school bank account, it was the practice in these cases to retain the general capitation and other general grants in the Board of Management account and to transfer grants for specific purposes, such as disadvantage grants, to bank accounts controlled by the principal or the HSCL coordinator.

3.17 The process employed to decide on the use of the grants provided was examined also. In half of the schools, teachers were made aware of the additional funds and funds were expended on an ad-hoc basis in response to requests. In nine schools, the application of the grants was discussed and decided at

an annual planning day. One school had conducted a pupil and teacher survey which was used in conjunction with test results and attendance figures to decide on relevant activities.

Use of HSCL Resources

3.18 In 2003-2004, 174 Home School Community Liaison coordinators were available to 305 primary schools.

3.19 The responsibilities of HSCL coordinators are generally set by a National Coordinator. All of the HSCL coordinators report to the school principal in their base school and liaise with class teachers. Most referrals to HSCL personnel come from class teachers, learning support teachers or the school principal. Less often, referrals come from outside agencies, the HSCL coordinator in feeder schools, other parents or concerned neighbours.

3.20 Six of the HSCL coordinators visited all new families in the school. This helped them decide on whether or not their support would be required. The criteria used to identify parents likely to require support reflect the generally accepted symptoms of disadvantage. These include poor attendance and low performance on the part of the pupil. Characteristics such as lone parents, drink or drug abuse and low educational achievement of the parents are likely indicators of a home where the support of the HSCL would be required. HSCL coordinators focus most of their efforts on this group.

3.21 Apart from using the opportunity to deliver information about the school, home visits may be prompted by factors such as

- noticeable problem with child's behaviour
- child with learning difficulties
- child appears to be neglected, hygiene issues, lack of food, tiredness or socially withdrawn
- awareness of crisis in family, bereavement, substance abuse
- absenteeism problem or child consistently late for school.

Activities of HSCL

3.22 The work carried out by the HSCL coordinator fits into two main categories of activity — supporting parents and creating links between the school and the community. The breakdown of activities in the schools visited, as estimated by the HSCL coordinators, is set out in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3 Breakdown of HSCL coordinator's time, 2003-2004

Activity	Proportion
Home visits ^a	28%
Contact with individual parents other than home visits	10%
Work with groups of parents courses, talks etc.	14%
Informal contact with groups of parents	7%
Total Contact with parents	59%
Liaison with other staff in schools	11%
Liaison with agencies in community	12%
Administration	11%
Other	7%
Total	100%

Note:

a A target of 30% has been set for this activity in the course of in-service training.

Supporting parents

3.23 HSCL coordinators link with families by way of home visits, initially to build up a relationship and, in due course, to provide support either directly through being available to discuss issues arising or through referral to another agency. Home visits were seen by coordinators as effective because visiting parents in their own home allowed for issues to be discussed in a confidential manner. Their experience was that when parents see that the school wants to support the family it tends to help forge strong relationships between parents and the school.

Other liaison activities

3.24 Most coordinators create awareness of their role and report on actions being undertaken through presentations at staff meetings with the remainder using school notice boards and bulletins.

3.25 In regard to links with the wider community, the majority of HSCL coordinators formed a local committee that met a number of times a year to discuss issues arising. The local committee typically has representation from the schools and various agencies operating in the area of disadvantage.

3.26 In regard to links with HSE personnel, about half of the coordinators link into the health service through community or public health nurses. Just over a quarter attend case meetings with social services if requested by the parents and a small number said the social services would contact them to get information regarding an individual child or they would contact social services if they were concerned about a child.

3.27 Otherwise, formal links between the community agencies operating in the area and the individual schools are normally through the school principal.

3.28 While a balance has to be struck between supporting parents and other liaison activities, most coordinators were not happy with the distribution of their time set out in Figure 3.3 and said they would like to devote more time to home visits. One coordinator said that if anything unexpected cropped up, home visits were the element of the job most likely to suffer. For many of the coordinators, it is not the number of homes they visit that is an issue for them but the frequency with which they can visit. Some coordinators felt they would be more effective if they were in a position to visit target families often and thus provide a high level of support.

Selecting SCP Participants

3.29 Each SCP cluster submits an annual Retention Plan outlining actions aimed at addressing early school leaving and identifying the numbers of pupils to be targeted under SCP together with the proposed cost. The Retention Plans are submitted to the National Coordinator for SCP and funding is provided to the individual clusters on this basis.

3.30 Every cluster has a management committee which oversees the direction of the programme at local level including the development of the Retention Plan. The management committee is responsible for the governance and direction of the project, the use of project resources and the management of budgetary allocations made to the project.

3.31 Responsibility for devising the Retention Plan lies mainly with the SCP coordinator — normally after consulting with project staff, the management committee, school principals, class teachers and community agencies. The Retention Plan is then devised on a bottom-up basis by examining the needs of the target pupils and seeking to deliver supports to address those needs.

3.32 The supports to be provided to the pupils targeted under the SCP programme are normally suggested by the principal or the class teachers when the pupil is being referred. Referral forms outline the reason for referral, the existing supports in place and the additional supports required.

3.33 In the clusters visited, the pupils selected for inclusion in SCP at primary level tended to be the older children — third to sixth class and particularly fifth and sixth class when problems become more obvious. This has the merit of focusing resources on actual problems.

3.34 The main selection criteria used by clusters were

- high levels of absenteeism
- family history of early school leaving
- pupil from a minority group
- lack of parental support
- anti-social or disruptive behaviour
- learning difficulties
- evidence of socio-economic deprivation.

3.35 In practice, a number of pupils are selected from each school for support by the SCP programme — the SCP target group. In the clusters visited, once children are placed on the target list for SCP they tend to stay on the list throughout their time in the education system unless they leave the area. This is especially true in the case of pupils getting more intensive supports.

3.36 In the schools selected for inclusion in the SCP programme, the SCP provides supports to about 16% of pupils. The number of pupils included in the SCP target group was compared to the relative level of disadvantage²¹ in schools. The results are shown in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4 Proportion of pupils supported by SCP, 2003-2004

Relative level of disadvantage ^a	Schools in SCP	Total enrolment	No. of pupils in SCP target group	Proportion of pupils in SCP target group
0%-10%	11	3,830	351	9.2%
11%-20%	32	8,681	983	11.3%
21%-30%	35	9,240	1,336	14.5%
31%-40%	25	5,680	989	17.4%
41%-50%	44	10,538	1,828	17.3%
51%-60%	33	7,695	1,306	17.0%
61%-70%	51	9,886	1,902	19.2%
71%-80%	30	6,092	1,219	20.0%
81%-90%	21	4,007	763	19.0%
91%-100%	2	234	70	29.9%
Total	284^b	65,883	10,747	16.3%

Notes:

- a For the purpose of presentation the relative disadvantage levels in the school were banded.
- b In total SCP provides support to 299 primary schools. However, 15 of these schools had not replied to the ERC survey in 2000 and hence the disadvantage level in the school is unknown. Those schools have been excluded from this analysis.

²¹ The most recent estimate of the relative level of disadvantage is the work carried out by the ERC in 2000 – paragraph 2.2 refers.

3.37 While the proportion of pupils included in the SCP programme, in general, rises with the relative level of disadvantage, the level of variation in the proportion of pupils is not as marked as might be expected. The pattern shown in Figure 3.4 would suggest that the criteria adopted do not allow for the selection of large numbers of pupils in the schools with high relative levels of disadvantage.

3.38 The interviews with the 20 schools visited tend to bear out this conclusion since principals stated that they could, in effect, refer a lot more children to SCP but most schools were operating on a 'quota' system under which SCP would ask them to refer a set number of children. This meant that a large number of pupils would be selected using the criteria set by SCP and the principal would then prioritise within this group.

Application of SCP funding

3.39 In addition to providing therapeutic supports and project workers to work with small groups of pupils, some clusters visited provide additional teaching resources to assist for selected periods in the mainstream class. Paired reading where parents, grandparents and volunteers help specific children with their reading was also provided.

3.40 Breakfast, lunch and homework clubs are run in most of the clusters. However, the homework clubs are expensive to run. This restricts some SCP projects to providing homework clubs for only one night a week. In some instances, SCP projects provide homework clubs in partnership with community and youth groups. Most SCP projects offer a range of other after school activities including clubs providing drama, music, dance and sporting activities. In general, the clubs have high participation rates from the target group.

3.41 A transfer programme is in operation in most clusters visited and aims to aid the transfer from primary to post-primary. In addition, a number of the clusters operated pupil to pupil and teacher to pupil mentoring systems to assist pupils at post-primary level.

3.42 It was estimated in the course of the examination that about €9.4m of the SCP resources had been spent at primary level in 2003-2004. Appendix E sets out how the overall SCP resources are utilised for both sectors. There is a need for recording more information on the application of resources by sector and activity. However, this needs to be done in a cost-effective way that minimises the burden of accounting on local staff.

Conclusions

In individual schools, the resources provided contributed to smaller class sizes and extra curricular activities in the areas of drama, sport, music and trips. HSCL and SCP provided intensive supports to targeted groups of parents and pupils. In regard to the application of initiative resources the examination found

- Resources provided at school level are largely devoted to the provision of extra teachers.
In order to enhance the impact of these resources, the initial training of teachers and subsequent in-service training should include modules on the teaching of disadvantaged pupils particularly in the key areas of methodology, target setting, pupil assessment and evaluation.
- At school level, only 5% of cash grants was applied on individual disadvantaged pupils.
While recognising the need to educate all pupils within the social context of the school, the Department should review whether resources can be targeted to better effect.
- Different arrangements for linking with the community and the health service operated in different schools.
While taking account of the need for flexibility, with the advent of the HSE, a more structured approach may be possible. It might also be beneficial to examine whether norms can be established to guide the service in its links with the community.
- In schools with high levels of disadvantage SCP is not reaching all pupils who meet the criteria for the programme.
There is a need to review the selection process applied to individual pupils under the SCP programme.

4 Addressing Disadvantage

4.1 The symptoms of disadvantage are not homogenous across different schools or areas and, as a result, the responses of schools and other agencies will necessarily vary.

4.2 This chapter sets out the views of key administrators and outlines their experience of initiatives that worked well together with the barriers and challenges to effectiveness. It examines the extent to which disadvantage has been addressed in schools while providing the optimum learning environment achievable and how well school based activities have been coordinated with HSCL and SCP initiatives.

4.3 Overall, principals and coordinators suggest that there is considerable scope for more joined up approaches and greater coordination. Most of the 20 schools surveyed said that they felt the various initiatives were operating in a fragmented manner. They stated there was a need for schools, the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), the HSE and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to work together more, outline their respective aims and objectives and put systems in place to deliver on these in a coordinated way.

Initiatives at School Level

4.4 Since schools cannot directly impact on the sources of social and economic impediments to education, their focus is necessarily on the consequences of this disadvantage. While overall teaching and learning is impacted by smaller class sizes, schools have adopted some specific initiatives, particularly in the areas of attendance and literacy.

Attendance

4.5 Absenteeism impacts negatively on the extent to which learning outcomes can be influenced by schools. The main effects of absenteeism for the student and for the other pupils in the class as outlined by the principals is shown in Figure 4.1.

4.6 Principals noted that a pupil who misses one block of time is not as disadvantaged as a child missing a large number of single days. In this regard, single day absence patterns tend to occur on Mondays and Fridays and days when the school closes early for a meeting while blocks of time taken often coincided with family holidays in June, September or October.

Figure 4.1 Effects of absenteeism**Effects on the student**

- Absent pupils fall behind their peers in key areas of literacy and numeracy. This leads them to feel unhappy and uncomfortable and lose confidence in themselves and their abilities.
- Pupils experience social exclusion, as they tend not to develop strong friendships in school due to absences and often miss out on sport or other extra curricular activities.
- Children with attendance issues are often disruptive when they are in school.
- Children get out of the habit of going to school, the more days they miss the less likely they are to fall back into a regular attendance pattern.
- Pupils have no consistency in carrying out tasks.
- Nearly all pupils in receipt of learning support have attendance issues. However, learning difficulties do not in general cause absenteeism. Places in learning support are very limited and a child who has less need but is a regular attender would benefit to a much greater degree.

Effects on other pupils

- Absent children are always playing catch-up and so there is a certain lack of momentum in the class, the class is moving at a slower pace than it should. The teacher will be slow to start a new topic on a day with low attendance.
- High levels of absenteeism impinge on the learning opportunities of regular attenders, as the teacher has to spend extra time with the student who was absent. This uses up valuable teaching time and the child who attends regularly loses out.
- It is not very good for class morale and pupils who attend regularly feel a sense of inequality as they often resent the extra attention the non-attender gets when they are in school.
- Regular attenders see children missing school with no obvious consequences and this may encourage other children to mitch especially in fifth and sixth class.

Schools experience – effective attendance interventions

4.7 On average 19.5% of pupils in the schools visited had missed more than 20 days in 2003-2004. The proportion of pupils missing in excess of 20 days varied from 4% of pupils to as high as 45%. These findings are in keeping with the levels identified by the NEWB. Analysis of survey data in respect of schools located in RAPID Areas showed that around 24% of pupils had been absent for more than 20 days in 2003. The schools visited had a variety of initiatives aimed at increasing attendance levels.

4.8 Five schools used an attendance monitor in an attempt to increase attendance levels. This entailed making contact with the parent after one day or a small number of days had been missed in order to establish the reason for the absence. It was found to heighten awareness of attendance with pupils, teachers and especially parents. However, although this approach worked well in the beginning, some schools felt that the effect has fallen off slightly.

4.9 Three schools considered the timing of extra curricular activities as the best way of influencing attendance. Having an activity which everybody likes on a Friday or a Monday, normally bad days for attendance, was instanced as having a big effect as pupils don't want to miss things they like doing.

4.10 Most schools operated an award system for full or near full attendance. The principals noted that while this addressed absenteeism in the case of a student who missed a few days it had little effect on chronic cases.

4.11 While a small number of schools use HSCL to address absenteeism, in general, the HSCL coordinators do not see addressing absenteeism as their primary objective. However, the school with one of the lowest levels of absenteeism among those visited used a very proactive approach to address absenteeism. In this school, if a child is absent for no apparent reason for two or three days the HSCL coordinator calls on the family and tries to establish the reason for the absence. If there is no reason for the absence, the HSCL coordinator will explain the fact that they must send the child to school. If the absence continues, the principal will call to the house, outline the educational implications of absence and stress the parents' responsibility to send the child to school.

Literacy

4.12 All of the schools surveyed carried out literacy testing in all classes²² every year. A wide variety of approaches and interventions was noted.

Schools experience – effective literacy interventions

4.13 Seven of the schools visited maintained that the most effective intervention to address literacy problems was the provision of learning support time because intensive support allows for individual problems to be identified and addressed. Some schools used team teaching to create variety which also has the perceived advantage that the pupils are not aware which teacher is the remedial teacher. Their experience was that pupils who received learning support showed strong improvement in test results. The principals voiced their concern over their inability to provide adequate support to pupils whose test results, although demonstrating literacy difficulties, are above the cut-off point for learning support — those pupils above the 10th percentile but below the 30th percentile²³.

4.14 Five of the schools visited had a literacy programme in place and pupils in these schools were reported as showing improvements at all levels in literacy test results. Principals ascribed the impact of these programmes to the fact that they raised teacher expectations, increased teacher motivation due to the introduction of new teaching methods, focused on outcomes and, more importantly, teachers began to experience success.

4.15 Two schools were operating a reading recovery programme and maintained that the impact would be felt over time as the participating pupils, who would otherwise require learning support in later years, were brought up to class level. While they maintain that it works, it is intensive in terms of teaching resources.

4.16 A variety of other general activities aimed at raising literacy levels were in operation.

- One school had appointed a literacy coordinator using a post of responsibility.
- Paired reading involving pupils reading with parents or grandparents was also cited as a very effective intervention in a number of schools as it provides useful support for pupils who are not getting learning support.

22 Literacy testing is normally carried out in first class with other tests like the MIST (Middle Infant Screening Test) in use for earlier classes.

23 A pupils percentile rank indicates his or her status or standing in relation to other pupils in the norm group – in this case the representative national sample of pupils on whom the test has been standardised.

- A 'Reader of the Month' award which gave a prize to the best or most improved reader each month was seen as very effective in one school because it raised interest in reading throughout the school.
- A similar initiative called 'DEAR Time' involving a specific period of time up to half an hour being set aside periodically when everybody including teachers and the principal would 'drop everything and read' was effective in another school since it focused the whole school on the importance of reading for pleasure.
- A school which ran a 'Read to Succeed' programme – an approach that teaches parents to help their children to read, maintained that this approach was effective.
- Trips to the library, purchase of interesting books and computer literacy packages, book clubs and book fairs were other approaches used to increase children's interest in reading.

4.17 The Department has informed me that the Minister has accepted advice provided by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2005 that all primary pupils should take standardised tests in literacy and numeracy at the end of first class or at the beginning of second class and at the end of fourth class or at the beginning of fifth class. Preparatory work for this is underway at present. The NCCA has been asked to prioritise the preparation of guidelines for schools on developing and implementing an assessment policy and on reporting to parents. The NCCA has also been asked to prepare exemplars of pupils' work to guide teachers' judgements and also, summaries based on the curriculum of what pupils should achieve at each level of their schooling. A national report card for recording and reporting data on pupils' attainment is also being developed, as is a national policy on the transfer of information from primary to post-primary schools. In tandem with this work, the Department is currently exploring potential implementation models, in advance of entering into discussions with the education partners on the matter. The provision of training to teachers on standardised testing will also be a key part of the implementation process.

Challenges and barriers faced by schools

4.18 Principals drew attention to the fact that, in some cases, the school receives little or no cooperation from the child's home. While it usually impacts on the completion of homework it may be more serious when appointments made with speech therapists, psychologists, counsellors and other support agencies are not kept.

4.19 In general, principals and HSCL coordinators felt that there was a lack of coordination between the efforts which the school was making to address disadvantage and those of other agencies. Schools working in disadvantaged areas rely to a great extent on the support of other agencies such as the NEWB, HSE, NEPS, the Gardaí and the Juvenile Liaison Officers. Most schools were of the opinion that activities of the schools in the area of disadvantage and services provided by other agencies lacked coordination.

4.20 The Department informed me that, through the development of a new network of ten regional offices, it is enhancing its capacity to work in partnership with locally based agencies and individuals promoting social inclusion measures. Under DEIS, the Department's Regional Offices Directorate will prepare an overall plan for addressing services integration and partnership working issues. This will take into account the potential for increased cooperation at local, county, regional and national level. The planning process will incorporate

- researching and evaluating, on a region by region basis, existing projects with an educational inclusion dimension and identifying opportunities for greater co-ordination, integration or partnership working

- identifying existing models of best practice for the delivery of integrated services and partnership working between education providers and those from other sectors, and promoting their wider application.

Liaison with the HSE

4.21 In general, the principals visited were not satisfied with the level of cooperation between the schools and the HSE staff and their comments can be summarised as follows

- When the school wants to refer a case for investigation, the principal rings the Duty Social Worker. Their call gets the same priority as that of any member of the public. The HSE will normally look for a report in writing. The principals find it difficult to provide ‘hard’ evidence as sometimes it is simply their experience that suggests that there is a problem requiring investigation.
- Within the Health Service, the case managers change frequently whether due to staff turnover or the HSE’s policy of staff rotation. This makes it difficult to follow the progress of a case.
- Where a case is being investigated and the primary report has come from the school this report is often given to the person being investigated. The principals concerned felt that such reports should remain confidential because disclosure can damage the relationship of trust that needs to exist between the parent and the school and may mean that the child is less honest or open with teachers thereafter.
- There is no feedback to the school in respect of individual cases other than a notification that the case is closed.

4.22 For its part, the HSE agreed with the principals that there is a need for greater coordination. It acknowledged that there is a mixed level of response across the country and a need for both HSE personnel and education staff to work more closely, identify their respective aims and objectives and develop a more harmonious relationship that allows for the fostering of working relationships at national and local level. One of the challenges in this area is that while the HSE is progressing to a more uniform approach the schools remain largely autonomous making it difficult to identify links that can easily facilitate collaboration.

4.23 It recognised that research is showing increasingly that education and the role of the teacher is highly significant in the development and wellbeing of a child. In conjunction with other government departments, the HSE is responsible for addressing issues of social inclusion, disadvantaged children, youth and families and responding to issues of poverty and the health and social care issues that emanate from these sources. This signals the importance of engaging with education personnel because the objectives of the HSE cannot be achieved without their active participation.

4.24 The HSE pointed out that the recent formation of the Minister for Children’s Office, at the end of 2005, could form a conduit to facilitate this engagement at national level. This approach could and should be reflected at local level which would provide a vehicle for these services to link and provide a mutually beneficial framework to engage in a coordinated way.

4.25 The HSE informed me that it found it difficult to comment on the frequency of change of case managers as this would not be universal across the country and it is more likely to happen where the staff turnover is high and where there are difficulties in recruitment.

4.26 In regard to its own investment in areas of deprivation, the HSE informed me that this takes the form of springboard projects which are centres in targeted areas to support children and families, family support initiatives, both directly and in collaboration with the Family Support Agency, neighbourhood

youth projects in areas of most need, pre-school supports, traveller health initiatives, community drug and alcohol counsellors and, in some areas, the HSE employs social inclusion staff.

4.27 Particular difficulty was experienced by principals both in getting clinical and other assessments and in securing follow on services such as speech therapy and child psychiatry for pupils who, in their opinion, appeared to require these services.

4.28 The HSE acknowledged that there are challenges to the health service to provide a satisfactory response to the demand for therapeutic services in some parts of the country. However, commenting on these concerns in a global way would not be helpful as the services across the country are at different stages of development. The formation of a local network would serve to highlight those areas most in need and provide a targeted response.

Liaison with the NEWB

4.29 The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 established the NEWB to carry out a range of functions across 4,000 primary and post primary schools throughout the State. The NEWB was established to ensure that every child attends school regularly, or otherwise receives an education or participates in training. One of their key roles is to act as an advocate or support for a child, parent or guardian if there is a difficulty with school attendance or educational welfare. The Board assumed its statutory responsibilities in May 2002. The main duties of the NEWB are outlined in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2 Duties of the National Educational Welfare Board

- Monitoring of school attendance, and taking a range of measures where children do not attend school and where parents breach their legal obligations in relation to school attendance.
- Registration of children receiving education in a place other than a recognised school and assessment of that education in order to ensure that the children are getting a certain minimum education.
- Gathering data on school attendance and non-attendance, suspensions and expulsions.
- Intervention in relation to proposed school expulsions.
- Registration of young people under 18 who are in employment, and preparation of education and training plans with those young people.

4.30 The NEWB is obliged, under its legislation, to take action in respect of every child missing school for more than 20 days, or, for lower levels of non-attendance, where the principal of a school expresses concern about a child's attendance.

4.31 The new board appears to have considerable work to do in order to deliver on its mandate to the satisfaction of schools. In about half the cases surveyed the schools were unhappy with the level of contact with the NEWB's Educational Welfare Officer (EWO). While, in the majority of those cases, the NEWB acknowledged receipt of reports of absenteeism by letter it did not, in general, request further information on individual cases or provide feedback on the action taken.

4.32 In the remaining cases (about half), while the schools were happy with the level of contact with the EWO, they expressed dissatisfaction with the action taken in cases of chronic absenteeism and, in particular, commented that

- There is a long delay between the reporting of individual cases and any action being taken by the EWO. In the meantime, the level of absenteeism for the pupil concerned continues to increase.
- Schools were unclear as to what the procedure was for the EWO in cases of reported absenteeism.

- The fear of legal sanction is dissipating because there are no obvious consequences for children's non attendance in school.

4.33 Schools felt that there should be guidelines in respect of the relationship between the EWO and the schools. This should cover the level of contact between the EWO and the school, planning of action to be taken in individual cases, provision of information by the schools and the provision of feedback to the school.

4.34 The scale of the problem of non-attendance in Ireland has been highlighted in the data that NEWB has now begun to gather. 84,000 children under the age of 16 miss more than 20 days each year and of these, close to 30,000 may be missing up to 40 days.

4.35 In addition, NEWB acknowledge that data on attendance and non-attendance are not in themselves sufficient to convey the scale of the challenge faced by NEWB's staff in addressing non-attendance. The evidence from the field staff, supported by its research programme into school attendance in Ireland, points to the fact that the concentration of attendance problems among schools and children in severely disadvantaged areas presents a major challenge both to NEWB and schools.

4.36 The NEWB informed me that attendance problems are very often linked to and associated with complex socio-economic circumstances in families, disaffection with school and difficult relationships with school staff. The nature of these problems means that solutions are equally complex and dependent on high levels of interagency coordination. Of their nature, they take time, skill and patience on the part of EWOs. In spite of these difficulties, NEWB's staff dealt successfully with 20,000 cases of recorded attendance problems since January 2004. However, the huge cohort of children who are missing out on education have needs that go well beyond the developing capacity of the organisation at present. The numbers of pupils entitled to a service from NEWB under the terms of the legislation far outstrips the current capacity to respond.

4.37 The decision to concentrate staff in RAPID areas, but also to attempt to locate a presence in all counties as far as possible was based on the assumption that staffing levels would be built up relatively quickly to enable the NEWB to address its legislative functions. This has not happened and referrals have risen while staffing levels have remained static.

4.38 The management of the demand for the service requires NEWB's Educational Welfare Service to prioritise children with the most significant levels of absenteeism, thus running the risk of developing as a reactive, fire-fighting service, rather than as a proactive, prevention-focused service as envisaged in the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. The levels of dissatisfaction noted among schools reflect this reality.

4.39 Particular aspects of its legislative remit which the NEWB has not managed to address as yet include

- **Chronic cases of non-attendance** - The law demands that NEWB responds when certain thresholds of non-attendance are reached. Educational Welfare staff struggle to meet these demands in the most disadvantaged areas. Because of the volume of referrals, the quality of the response is being diluted. Outside of these disadvantaged areas, NEWB can only respond where children are absent for 60 days or more or where they are out of school.
- **Early intervention** - All the evidence suggests that early intervention is better and more effective than intervention after poor school attendance patterns have become established. The emphasis up to now has been very much on providing a service to children with established difficulties.
- **Prevention strategies** - It has not been possible to get to the more preventative work that must be done by schools and families and by others in society through more positive attitudes to school attendance. NEWB has a key role in developing and supporting schools in adopting more proactive strategies to keep children in school and to reduce absenteeism.

- ***16/17 year olds who leave school to take up employment*** - Under the law, 16 and 17 years olds must be registered with the NEWB before they can enter employment. This part of the Act has not been activated due to a lack of resources. The purpose of this section is to ensure that early school leavers continue in some form of education up to 18 years of age.

4.40 Appendix F sets out an analysis of the mandate of the NEWB, the status of implementation of that mandate and its strategic focus.

4.41 The NEWB acknowledged that the issues of coordination among agencies charged with tackling educational disadvantage are very real. As a new and developing organisation, NEWB is in the process of developing linkages and relationships with key agencies. However, its experience to date would suggest that the challenge of coordination will go well beyond administrative linkages and will have to address difficult considerations of joint planning and priority setting at local level, resource allocation and issues of joint national strategy.

4.42 It noted that section 12 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 empowers it to establish mechanisms to ensure coordination between the functions and policies of a range of agencies whose remit may impact on or interact with it. This section of the Act has potential to improve coordination.

4.43 The Department informed me that it is currently working with the NEWB with a view to ensuring that any opportunities for integrated working between EWOs and staff on other educational disadvantage programmes, whose work involves an attendance element, are exploited to the maximum. It is considered that the implementation of protocols for integrated working on attendance matters is very important and an Assistant Chief Inspector in the Department is currently chairing a working group which has the objective of developing such protocols as soon as possible. When in place, these will assist the NEWB in carrying out its remit and ensure that all available existing resources are utilised to the optimum. It also noted that the HSCL Scheme, SCP and the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers entail the employment of about 500 staff. Each of these schemes contributes in a positive way to promoting the education of children and young people, including their attendance at school.

Home School Community Liaison Initiatives

4.44 HSCL coordinators have organised certain interventions that, in their opinion, work well and they have also experienced certain challenges and barriers.

HSCL experience – effective initiatives

4.45 A ‘Maths for Fun’ initiative aimed at increasing numeracy levels was seen by a number of HSCL coordinators as being very successful. This involved a number of parents being trained to assist in teaching maths. The coordinators felt it was effective because it involved parents, teachers and children all working together in a structured learning environment. While this was seen to raise the skills of pupils, the coordinators were of the opinion that it impacted favourably on the self esteem of parents also.

4.46 ‘Parents in Education’ is an initiative aimed at increasing parents’ involvement in the operation of the school. This normally entails training a small number of parents to assist in the overall running of the school either through being members of particular committees or providing support to other parents. The experience of the coordinators was that a high degree of parental involvement in the general running of the school helps to build a sense of community.

4.47 A number of other courses are also run for parents. Two courses cited as good practice were a parenting course and a computer course to help prepare parents for work. The parenting course was seen as effective since it gave parents a chance to meet and discuss issues arising in their child’s life and

possible responses. The computer course was seen as effective as some parents had secured employment as a result.

Challenges and barriers faced by HSCL coordinators

4.48 In regard to the effectiveness of their liaison, HSCL coordinators stated that

- In some cases there was a lack of communication between HSCL, the school and outside agencies particularly social services.
- Opportunities to talk to class teachers about individual pupils were inadequate.
- The coordinators felt that there was not enough time to complete all aspects of the job and as a result they did not spend as much time as they would like on conducting home visits.

4.49 They thought that the HSCL grant was not sufficient and that a lot of time was wasted looking for additional funding from other agencies.

4.50 A particular difficulty arises when there is a lack of response from the pupil's home often due to otherwise positive factors such as increasing employment of the target group or work commitments generally. However, on the other side of the coin, some families do not respond due to the impact of social factors ranging from substance abuse to lack of childcare facilities.

4.51 While the coordinators provide a variety of supports for parents in the target group, it is generally accepted that the most marginalised parents do not attend courses and require more intensive individual support. The main reasons given for parents not engaging were substance or alcohol abuse in the home or sickness or depression of a parent.

4.52 The Department informed me that as part of an ongoing process of putting Key Performance Indicators in place for the HSCL Scheme, the issue of prioritising the different tasks to be undertaken by coordinators, and hence the amount of time to be allocated to each task is being kept under review. The national team will continue to support coordinators in developing strategies to reach the target of at least 30% of time dedicated to home visits (the average figure for 2004 was 27%). Active consideration is being given to increasing the HSCL grant as part of the process of providing additional non-pay supports to schools participating in the new School Support Programme under DEIS.

School Completion Programme Initiatives

4.53 Certain effective initiatives were outlined by SCP coordinators and in addition they were experiencing challenges and barriers in some areas.

SCP experience – effective interventions

4.54 One cluster had focused on improving inter agency collaboration. This arose where a small number of children were presenting with challenging behaviour and the schools could not cope with that behaviour. All of the agencies came together in a meeting, initially to share the information each agency had on each child. This coordinated approach continued with frequent contact between the agencies regarding the progress of the individual pupils and the effect of the supports provided. The effect of this was twofold — a coordinated approach to the support of these pupils and also an increase in the contact between the school, SCP, HSCL and all of the agencies involved in supporting disadvantaged pupils.

4.55 In another cluster, individual work and work in small groups was seen as a very useful approach for children with low levels of self-esteem and confidence. This allowed a reduction in performance comparison and a focus on their personal achievement.

4.56 In another cluster, pupils with poor attendance patterns and behavioural issues took part in activities involving care of horses and horse riding. Participation in this activity was linked to attendance and behaviour at school. The coordinator was of the opinion that it affected attendance and behaviour in a very positive way.

4.57 A Breakfast Club run in one of the clusters also checked homework and completed any homework outstanding as well as providing pens, copies and other materials if children required them. The coordinator felt it was effective as there was a very high participation rate.

4.58 In general, the provision of therapeutic supports as well as individual or group contact sessions was identified as effective particularly in dealing with pupils with behavioural and anger management issues. While the effect of these supports were difficult to measure the SCP coordinators reported that parents and teachers have observed changes in behaviour of the pupils — reflected in less conflict between the pupil and their parent or teacher or a greater level of participation in the case of a withdrawn child.

Challenges and barriers — SCP

4.59 In some cases, coordinators complained that schools were not engaging with the SCP. As a result, the coordinators had difficulty getting appropriate referrals and delivering the required supports. Although the SCP is in existence for a number of years, there is a lack of clear guidelines especially in relation to the role of SCP in schools and some coordinators were of the opinion that the SCP is still ‘operating very much on the fringes’.

4.60 The SCP coordinators visited stated that some schools place more emphasis on their general body of pupils and do not seem to agree with the intensity of supports provided to individual pupils by the SCP. Since individual schools are an integral part of the SCP they may need to buy in to the philosophy more. In some cases, there was a perceived resistance to SCP staff as many of them are not teachers.

4.61 The SCP does not have access to parents as this is the role of the HSCL coordinators. In some cases, this was perceived by coordinators as a limitation on the effectiveness of supports provided to individual pupils.

4.62 While summer camps and a range of out of school activities are provided by the programme, some of the clusters felt that not as many of the target group as they would like attended. For example, it was felt that a plethora of summer camps organised by different agencies were competing for the same group of children.

4.63 Some coordinators felt that although local autonomy was beneficial, there was room for the development of a more centralised approach in relation to the preparation of policies and procedures for the protection of SCP staff and the children they support.

4.64 The Department informed me that all but 17 of the 82 SCP clusters commenced operation in 2002-2003 and much of the first school year was spent in setting up management committees and developing administrative and managerial functions for the programme at local level. Therefore, 2003-2004 was, in effect, the first school year in which the programme was in full operation. The development of SCP services will continue under the DEIS action plan. The programme will be fully evaluated in 2006-2007, with any appropriate changes being made to the model of support involved. School clusters participating in the new School Support Programme will be required to incorporate any best practices identified into their action plans.

4.65 Administrative and Financial Guidelines for SCP Projects were prepared by the Department and circulated to all 82 projects in Autumn 2003. These include guidelines in relation to financial management, reporting, control procedures and insurance to be followed by projects.

4.66 Over the five year implementation period for DEIS, both SCP and HSCL services will be integrated into the new unified School Support Programme framework. The Department confirmed that access to parents is not the sole prerogative of HSCL. The respective roles of HSCL and SCP coordinators will be fully dovetailed in implementing the new integrated School Support Programme.

Conclusions

Resources are deployed so as to address the educational needs of pupils who have to contend with social and economic disadvantage. This chapter has outlined a variety of initiatives taken by schools in the areas of literacy promotion and combating absenteeism.

While not all approaches are universally applicable it would be useful for the Department to create a mechanism for examining the effectiveness of these initiatives and disseminating good practice opportunities throughout the primary school system.

- Schools felt they were often limited in what they could achieve due to a lack of coordination with other agencies.

There is a need for guidelines to govern the arrangements for coordination between schools, NEPS, NEWB and HSE.

- Links between HSCL and other school personnel are sometimes hampered by a lack of opportunity to communicate mutual concerns.

There is a need to find a balance in the work of HSCL coordinators between coordinators' work at school level and home and community liaison. This may involve revisiting and clarifying the role of HSCL coordinators.

- The SCP programme delivers a wide variety of supports to highly disadvantaged pupils. Some clusters were not happy with the level of support received from schools.

More needs to be done to promote the philosophy of SCP - the provision of intensive supports to a restricted number of children at risk of early school leaving. In addition, a set of guidelines needs to be developed to guide the relationship between schools and the SCP clusters.

- A wide variety of approaches and interventions aimed at increasing literacy levels were in operation.

There would be merit in providing a forum to exchange experiences and information especially in relation to evaluation of the approaches taken.

- Schools can only address educational needs of pupils who are regular attenders. Some schools had marked success in combating absenteeism while others continue to have chronic problems.

There is a particular need to evaluate those attendance initiatives, which appear to have worked well, and the general context in which they were used.

- The NEWB does not appear to have achieved the degree of effectiveness desired by schools. Half the schools were unhappy with the level of contact with the service and the remainder had concerns with the timeliness of actions taken by the service.

There is a need to examine how the NEWB can intervene in a more timely fashion before absenteeism begins to impact detrimentally on the capacity of the school to educate the student.

5 Effectiveness of Disadvantage Initiatives

5.1 Overall, success in addressing impediments to the achievement of a pupils educational potential might be gauged from literacy, numeracy and attendance levels. In fact, these are the areas targeted in recent national plans. In order for the Department to be in a position to monitor and evaluate progress it would be necessary to track the trend in these three areas at both national and school level.

5.2 This chapter examines the arrangements for monitoring and evaluation at those levels in terms of whether

- relevant performance targets and indicators have been selected
- arrangements are in place for the collection, analysis and review of performance information.

5.3 In addition, because of the nature of the phenomenon of disadvantage and especially its variability, it is suggested that performance measurement would need to be supplemented by the ongoing identification of opportunities for better intervention and management.

National Level Objectives

5.4 The high level goals of the Department, as stated in its Statement of Strategy 2003-2005, included the following objectives

- To deliver an education that is relevant to the individual's personal, social, cultural and economic needs.
- To support, through education, a socially inclusive society with equal opportunity for all.

5.5 Initiatives to tackle disadvantage are part of the measures designed to address these objectives.

Targets and Indicators

5.6 The 1997 National Anti-Poverty Strategy set a range of ten-year targets across all government departments in relation to indicators of social exclusion. Included in these were specific targets related to performance in the areas of literacy and retention of pupils at school.

5.7 However, an inter-departmental review of the progress by 2000 found that the targets set in relation to education had not been met. The subsequent National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion, 2003–2005 set revised targets. Figure 5.1 outlines the targets set under the 1997 and 2003 strategies.

Figure 5.1 Comparison of the targets set in 1997 and 2003

Indicator	1997	2003
Retention		
Junior Cycle Completion	Elimination of non-completion	—
Senior Cycle Completion ^a	90% by 2000 98% by 2007	85% by 2003 and 90% by 2006
Literacy		
Number of primary pupils with serious literacy difficulties	Reduction to zero	Halved by 2006
Post-primary pupils with literacy difficulties	—	Halved by 2006
Adults with literacy difficulties	—	Reduced by 10% by 2006

Note:

a Leaving Certificate in 1997; Leaving Certificate or equivalent in 2003

5.8 The 1997 targets reflected the first attempt to set targets at national level. The target of reducing to zero the number of primary pupils with serious literacy difficulties was clearly unrealistic. The 2003 targets reflect this.

5.9 The most recent target set for the primary sector is to halve the number of primary pupils with serious literacy difficulties by 2006. The target focuses only on that segment of the pupil population with literacy difficulties.

5.10 When targets are set it is important that they be measurable. While it would be generally accepted that pupils with serious literacy difficulties are those scoring at or below the 10th percentile, the term literacy difficulty has not been explicitly defined. This effectively means that performance cannot be properly tracked for this objective.

5.11 The Department is considering a recommendation of the ERC in the context of the implementation of DEIS that

- the new 10 year target should be to reduce to between 14%-15% the proportion of pupils in disadvantaged schools who score at or below the 10th percentile on a specified standardised test
- the target should be supported by short-term targets, at system and school level and targets for average and high-achieving pupils.

5.12 It is desirable that national targets be established in the areas of attendance and school completion in order to allow for assessment of overall achievement in addressing a major impediment to education — non attendance and drop out rates.

Performance Information

5.13 Target setting needs to be matched with periodic reviews of outcomes based on indicators derived from reliable data.

Literacy levels

5.14 The majority of primary schools conduct standardised tests of literacy in all classes every year. The Micra-t test²⁴ was the most popular in the schools visited. However, the results of these tests are retained by schools and as a result the Department does not regularly collate and publish the results on a national basis or use them in order to evaluate outcomes.

5.15 Assessment of reading has, however been conducted at national level. These national assessments commenced in 1972, and since then, an exercise has been undertaken on five further occasions in 1980, 1988, 1993, 1998 and 2004. The most recent of these was the 2004 National Assessment of English Reading (NAER) conducted by the ERC on behalf of the Department.

5.16 The main objective of the 2004 NAER was to assess current reading standards and compare with the outcome of the 1998 NAER. In addition, it attempted to identify relationships between reading standards and characteristics of the pupil, school, teacher and home background. As in previous surveys, the reading achievement of a representative national sample of pupils in fifth class was assessed for comparison with earlier assessments. In addition, for the first time the performance of a representative sample of pupils in first class was also assessed.

5.17 The 2004 NAER assessment found that standards of English reading had not changed since 1998 and that overall standards had not changed since 1980. In both 1998 and 2004, pupils in designated disadvantaged schools had significantly lower average scores than pupils in non-designated schools with a slightly bigger gap in 2004 than in 1998. The data suggest a slight drop in reading standards of pupils in designated disadvantaged schools between 1998 and 2004.

5.18 While the assessment noted that girls in general had higher reading standards than boys such gender differences are not unique to Ireland. Lower pupil achievement was linked to background characteristics like medical card coverage, low socio-economic status, parental unemployment and low parental educational attainment.

5.19 There was also evidence to suggest that pupils benefited from being taught by an experienced teacher employed in a permanent capacity who has attended in-career development on the English curriculum and who regularly assessed pupils. While in schools generally, less than 3% of teaching staff were unqualified, it was found that in designated disadvantaged schools 12% of pupils in first class and 6% of fifth class were taught by an unqualified teacher.

5.20 In addition to assessments of reading at national level, in 2003, the ERC was commissioned to examine literacy levels in disadvantaged schools. The terms of reference of the study were to

- obtain baseline data on the reading achievement of pupils in first, third and sixth classes in a representative sample of designated disadvantaged schools using an appropriate reading test
- identify variables associated with the reading achievement of these pupils
- make recommendations that would facilitate reaching the targets for reading literacy specified in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

5.21 The 2003 assessment was based on the administration of a sentence reading test to 6,500 children spread between first, third and sixth classes in 94 schools designated as disadvantaged. The research compared the results of the tests administered for this study with a representative national sample of pupils who had participated in the standardisation of the test one year earlier.

24 The Micra-t test was first developed in 1988 under the aegis of the Curriculum Development Unit, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Different levels of the test exist which allows for comparison of the reading performance of pupils from first class to sixth class with reading standards nationally.

5.22 The resulting report noted that there were substantial differences in the literacy scores achieved by pupils in the disadvantaged schools and pupils in the national standardisation exercise. Poor literacy scores were much more likely amongst disadvantaged pupils. For instance

- between 27% and 29% (depending on grade level) of pupils in designated disadvantaged schools scored at or below the 10th percentile
- between 43% and 52% scored at or below the 25th percentile.

5.23 The differences were more or less constant across grades showing that the gap that emerges in first class lasts through to sixth class. The report also concluded that the achievement of pupils in schools designated disadvantaged may be poorer than the data suggest – given that exclusion and absenteeism may serve to understate difficulties. Hence, the gap between designated disadvantaged schools and non-disadvantaged schools may be wider than has been estimated.

5.24 Similar results were found by the Department's inspectorate in a review of a sample of disadvantaged schools. 43% of pupils in the schools surveyed had literacy levels that fell into the bottom 20% of pupils nationally.

5.25 In order to track performance over time it is desirable that measurement of literacy performance in disadvantaged schools should be regularly undertaken and a comparison carried out with standardised national performance in order to track whether pupils in this category are surmounting the impediments to education that arise from disadvantage.

Numeracy levels in disadvantaged schools

5.26 In a review of numeracy in a selected number of schools with high levels of disadvantage (nine schools in all) the inspectorate of the Department found that the results of 64% of pupils in these schools were in the bottom 20% of all primary school pupils. There was a wide variation in results with one school performing in line with the national average, while in two schools around 80% of pupils tested had results that fell in the bottom 20% nationally.

5.27 These samples are quite small and highlight the need for wider periodic national assessments of numeracy to inform policy making and teaching approaches to mathematics. In this regard, a national assessment of mathematical achievement in fourth class which was conducted in 2004 should provide valuable information on overall trends²⁵. The results should be available in Autumn 2006. The Department has informed me that it is working actively towards implementing two main recommendations in the area of standardised testing

- that all primary pupils should be tested in both literacy and numeracy twice in their school lives and
- that the programme of national monitoring be expanded.

Absenteeism

5.28 The absence of historical data in relation to absenteeism makes it difficult to evaluate the results of the initiatives in this area. The NEWB began collecting data, for the first time, in September 2003. A survey of all primary and post primary schools was carried out in order to establish

- the total number of days lost through absenteeism in 2003

25 The most recently reported national survey of mathematics dates from 1999. Ireland also participated in international surveys of mathematics in the 1990s.

- the number of pupils who were absent for 20 days or more during 2003.

5.29 Analysis of the data collected indicated that at primary level, on average, each student was absent for 11 days out of the total 183 school days and one-tenth of pupils were absent for 20 days or more. Attendance was lower in disadvantaged areas with 20 days absence on average for each student and about one in four pupils absent for 20 days or more in 2003.

5.30 Non-attendance reduces the quality of outcomes that a pupil can be expected to achieve from the education system and is a warning sign of early school leaving. It is not confined in its effect to the individual student and it impacts also on the effectiveness of teaching within the class. More needs to be done to isolate the main causes of non-attendance and evaluate attendance patterns in the light of measures taken under the initiatives or otherwise.

5.31 It is essential that the NEWB gear up to produce information on the extent, causes and consequences of absenteeism in order to allow for effective policy setting to address this impediment to educational achievement.

5.32 The NEWB has informed me that it fully concurs with the importance of having a fuller insight into the causes of non-attendance and a detailed picture of patterns of attendance and non-attendance. With these requirements in mind, it has initiated a programme of research aimed at addressing these issues and the initial reports are now ready for publication. It informed me that these will be built upon with further in-depth studies in the current year, and will guide the planning of school attendance policy and strategies at both national and local level.

School Level Evaluation

5.33 Each school is presented with different impediments to educational disadvantage. Consequently, it would be appropriate to plan interventions and track their outcome at school level over time. Overall school outcomes in key areas such as literacy and attendance should be part of a performance monitoring framework.

5.34 Effective evaluation at school level is not possible in the absence of targets, performance information and outcome indicators.

5.35 None of the schools visited had set measurable targets for improvements in literacy, although almost all of the schools had interventions aimed at raising literacy levels. While schools believed that it would be useful to set such objectives concerns existed among principals that improvements in any one year would be likely to be small and it would make sense to set targets in a three or five year plan as opposed to the annual school plan.

5.36 None of the schools visited had set measurable objectives for improvements in attendance levels. All of the schools agreed that it would be useful to set measures and suggested possible objectives. Some of the objectives suggested are

- to reduce the number of children missing more than 20 days
- to increase overall attendance by a set percentage
- to look for improvements for those pupils missing large number of days (50+)

5.37 Monitoring of achievement might best be implemented in the context of the school planning process which is now undertaken in all primary schools on an annual basis as a result of a School Development Planning Initiative established in 1999 in an effort to stimulate and strengthen a culture of

collaborative development planning in schools. The process aims to promote school improvement and effectiveness.

Opportunities for Improved Administration

5.38 Four of the schools visited had a separate plan for interventions in the area of disadvantage. However, while the plans listed proposed actions they did not set objectives or select possible measures of performance.

5.39 A specific plan spanning three to five years would heighten awareness of the expected outcomes of interventions. Its existence would incentivise teachers and principals to set goals in respect of pupils and parents and establish a timescale and measurement criteria. This would also have the benefit of allowing schools to critically assess their interventions and methods.

5.40 However, a system like this would require significant expertise and schools would need assistance to get it started. The selection of appropriate performance measures was highlighted by principals as an area where the school would require the most assistance. While it is relatively easy to monitor achievements in areas such as literacy, numeracy and attendance, it is much more difficult to develop measures that capture other effective outcomes such as improvements in behaviour, increased confidence and self-esteem and improved parental involvement.

5.41 The principals were of the opinion that there were opportunities for improving effectiveness and their suggestions can be summarised as follows.

- In regard to the application of disadvantaged resources, schools would like general guidelines from the Department on what they are allowed to spend the money on. Within these general guidelines, they would like increased autonomy on the application of disadvantage funds coupled with increased accountability for that decision.
- While most schools would welcome operating under a medium term plan principals emphasised that schools would need assistance in setting goals particularly when these are first being developed.
- While not all successful interventions would transfer from school to school, some system was desirable to share the results of the various interventions tried by the schools.
- Principals in disadvantaged schools face a set of challenges which may be very different to those in a less disadvantaged area. Schools felt that a forum or other mechanism to facilitate increased collaboration between principals in disadvantaged schools could lead to the spread of better practice.

Evaluation at SCP cluster level

5.42 Since the focus of SCP activity is on retention, attendance is a proxy indicator of performance in this area. However, none of the Retention Plans for clusters visited contained measurable targets for improvement in this area. All of the coordinators felt this could be useful and suggested the following as possible targets

- Improve attendance for each target student by a set percentage
- Increase attendance of a whole school by a set rate
- Reduce the number of target pupils missing in excess of 20 days.

5.43 There was divided opinion on the value of literacy targets in the context of the SCP. Three of the coordinators felt that it would be useful to set targets for improvements in the literacy levels of the target group and suggested aiming to improve their test scores by a set percentage. Two coordinators felt that it would not be appropriate for SCP to set literacy targets in the Retention Plans and thought it was more appropriate for the individual schools to set these targets.

5.44 It was considered too difficult to select measures which would capture the effects of SCP interventions on the behaviour, confidence and self esteem of the pupils included in the programme. None of the coordinators had included targets for improvements in these areas and all of the coordinators thought that research would be required to devise appropriate measures which would most likely involve a survey of pupils, teachers, parents and SCP staff.

5.45 Despite a lack of measurable targets, the clusters visited had a number of approaches to reviewing the individual interventions.

5.46 In one cluster, staff members wrote up a comment on every student in every programme every day. These were available for review by the coordinator. All of the coordinators met with project staff (where such staff existed) individually about once a month to discuss the individual interventions. The coordinators also met with school principals, link teachers²⁶ and class teachers periodically to discuss the progress of interventions.

5.47 With regard to evaluation of individual interventions, two of the clusters conducted twice yearly surveys involving teachers and pupils to assess the interventions. Parents were also occasionally surveyed. One of the clusters used the project group setting in order to discuss the impact of interventions. Two of the clusters did not evaluate the effectiveness of individual interventions.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the retention plan

5.48 The five clusters used discussions with their management committees as the main method of reviewing the Retention Plan as a whole. The effectiveness of the approach adopted was, therefore, discussed in light of the development of the Retention Plan for the following year.

5.49 One cluster had formally evaluated its Retention Plan using an external expert at the beginning of 2005. This evaluation might serve as an initial guide as to the measures and indicators that might be adopted more generally. Figure 5.2 outlines them.

26 Link teachers are mainstream class teachers teaching in schools included in the SCP whose responsibility is to liaise between the school and the SCP programme.

Figure 5.2 Measures and indicators for SCP evaluations

Quantitative Measures	Qualitative Indicators
Number of children engaged by the programme	Linkages between agencies
Attendance rates at SCP activities	Satisfaction with the range of activities
Number of strands of activity delivered by the programme	Children benefiting in terms of personal social and academic development
Number of qualified staff engaged in delivery of SCP activities	Skills and attitudes of SCP staff as measured in feedback from schools outside agencies and pupils
Number of outside agencies involved in the project	Increased focus of all agencies (including schools) on the problems experienced by the target group.
Level of contact with parents measured by number of SCP parents visited	
Attendance rates for the whole school	

5.50 The evaluation also identified a number of areas requiring change in the operation of the particular SCP cluster. These might serve as triggers for self-evaluation by other clusters and included the following findings and recommendations

- The referral of pupils by schools to SCP should be on foot of a standardised referral practice.
- The overall system used for recording and monitoring the development and outcomes of the programme needed to be reviewed. The current system lacks clarity and cohesion. The core areas requiring development were identified as evaluating impacts and assigning responsibilities as to the provision of information required.
- The role of SCP in supporting parents needed to be developed. The impact of this on the work of the HSCL also required clarification.
- Improvements were required in the communication between SCP and schools so that difficulties highlighted by schools and SCP staff regarding profile information on children, time scheduling of activities and feedback from schools are addressed.
- The feedback indicated that there were gaps in relation to the engagement of some key agencies in the programme which were likely to lessen the potential effectiveness of the project. Among the key agencies highlighted were the Juvenile Liaison Officer (JLO) and the HSE. Efforts needed to be made to address these gaps.
- Guidelines to support schools and allow SCP staff to work effectively with schools needed to be put in place.

Scheme Level Evaluations

5.51 The ultimate goal of combating educational disadvantage is to address the problems experienced by pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in a way that brings about improvements in their intellectual development, and their educational achievements and attainment. However, because of the number of initiatives and the fact that each one attempts to address different aspects of disadvantage it is difficult to relate any trend in indicators like attendance and literacy with particular interventions. To the extent that it has been attempted, evaluation has mostly focused on tracking the perception of professionals in regard to their ability to respond to the learning needs of disadvantaged pupils using the additional resources provided and their assessment of the trend in discipline and suspensions as a result of the measures.

5.52 The ERC evaluated the HSCL scheme in April 2003. Measurable targets had not been set for the initiative and therefore subsequent evaluation was confined to recording the perceptions and assessments of teachers and coordinators. Nonetheless, these experiences are valuable in gaining insight into outcomes. The evaluation noted that teachers were finding

- improved behaviour, school attendance and scholastic achievement
- greater care in the pupils school work
- a more positive attitude from pupils to school, teachers and their parents
- an increased number of parents visiting the school and becoming involved in school activities
- increased contact between teachers and parents
- parents have increased confidence.

Views of the Department

5.53 The Department has informed me that a crucial aspect of the DEIS action plan will be a more developed planning process, implemented through the School Development Planning Initiative, and improved arrangements for measuring progress and outcomes at both local and national level.

5.54 The implementation of the new action plan will be supported by a planning process at two levels — individual school level and school cluster/community level. A common set of indicators will be developed on a partnership basis to facilitate progress reporting on the implementation of school action plans. The indicators being considered include pupil attendance, pupil retention and literacy and numeracy attainment. A tailored planning template will be put in place to facilitate the development of three-year action plans for schools.

5.55 Under DEIS, the Department, with the advice and assistance of the EDC, will implement an in-depth programme of both research and evaluation to inform policy formation in this area on an ongoing basis. An increased emphasis will be placed on providing regular feedback on the operation of programmes, as well as evaluating the overall worth or value of particular measures.

5.56 The Department will determine how progress and outcomes achieved by all of the contributors, including itself, are to be evaluated during and at the end of the three year action plans to be implemented by individual schools and clusters participating in the School Support Programme under the DEIS initiative. Appropriate data-gathering arrangements will be put in place in this context.

Conclusions

It is recognised that the impact of the initiatives is difficult to capture due to the variety of measures involved and the fact that whole school resources are also devoted to addressing disadvantage.

- The most recent target set for improvements in literacy levels in the primary sector was to halve the number of primary pupils with literacy difficulties by 2006.

The term literacy difficulties needs to be defined and the information to be used to track performance in that area needs to be identified.
- In order to facilitate evaluation at national level, performance of disadvantaged pupils supported by the initiatives needs to be tracked consistently over time by reference to a representative sample of all pupils.

In order to do this it is important that consideration be given to tracking using broad measures and indicators – particularly in the key areas of literacy, numeracy and attendance.
- No targets were set for attendance levels and there is a lack of information in respect of the causes and effects of absenteeism. While the NEWB is beginning to build up a profile of attendance patterns this information needs to be built upon to allow for better management of absenteeism.

Targets need to be set for national attendance levels and evaluations carried out on the causes and effects of absenteeism.
- Schools have not set targets associated with their interventions in addressing disadvantage.

Schools should set short to medium term targets for achievement in the areas of literacy, numeracy and attendance and monitor individual achievement and overall outcomes in the light of those targets.
- Literacy and numeracy levels for a selection of disadvantaged schools reviewed by the Department's inspectorate in 2004 were low relative to overall national levels. In literacy 43% of pupils in the schools reviewed had results that fell into the bottom 20% of all pupils while for numeracy the corresponding level was 64%.

There appears to be a need to create a greater linkage on a whole school basis between the assessment of the results of standardised testing, the adoption of teaching methodologies and strategies and the creation of learning goals for lessons.
- At school level, despite the fact that the School Development Planning Initiative was first implemented in disadvantaged schools in 1999, evaluation systems in those schools are not developed.

Evaluation at school level needs to be improved through the provision of expertise and support in planning, target setting, monitoring and evaluation.
- Because specific targets were not set for the activities of SCP meaningful evaluation was not possible at cluster or national level.

There is a need to develop performance indicators that capture the desired impact of the interventions delivered by SCP in order to facilitate subsequent evaluation.

Appendices

Appendix A Summary of Submissions to the Minister from the Educational Disadvantage Committee

The Educational Disadvantage Committee has made three submissions to the Minister for Education and Science. A summary of the conclusions and recommendations of each submission is shown below.

Identifying Disadvantage for the Purpose of Targeting Resources and Other Supports, March 2003

The main conclusions and recommendations were

- The development of a Primary School Pupil Database would greatly facilitate the identification of pupils and schools in the context of dealing with educational disadvantage.
- Pending the development of such a database, there was a need for greater collaboration between the Department and other Government departments and agencies with regard to the sharing of socio-economic data.
- The issue of including educational variables (e.g. measures of pupil achievement) among the criteria for selection of primary schools needed to be revisited.
- There was a need for procedures to identify schools that are experiencing changes in their socio-economic profiles and to monitor the changes.
- Research on the social context effect and on differences between disadvantage, as it is experienced in urban and rural areas, should be included in a wider programme of research on the nature of disadvantage.

Teacher Supply and Staffing in Disadvantaged Settings, April 2003

The main recommendations were

- A comprehensive database to allow for better forward planning, based on agreed and realisable staffing schedules would need to be developed. This would record the intake and output from programmes of teacher education, the system's anticipated need for new teachers, the location and role of individual teachers, attrition and its patterns as well as retirement and career breaks.
- Steps should be taken designed to contribute to improvements in the quality of provision for all pupils but especially disadvantaged pupils. These would include the adoption by the Department of a commitment to having a fully qualified teaching force at the earliest possible stage. In addition, the implications for teachers' qualification levels should be considered when new schemes were being introduced. An increase in posts at Principal and Deputy Principal level in disadvantaged schools was also proposed. The report also recommended that a pilot programme allowing for pupil assessment, mentoring and counselling should be provided to all schools in settings of educational disadvantage.
- Additional supports should be considered for teachers in disadvantaged settings. These could include allowances, a sabbatical year or more favourable pension arrangements together with support for teachers taking part in post graduate training and in career development with a focus on positive interventions in educational disadvantage.

- The introduction of a Direct Access programme to all pre-service education programmes should be considered so that a greater proportion of individuals from disadvantaged settings can enter such programmes.
- Teacher training should offer modules on teaching in disadvantaged settings.

A More Integrated and Effective Delivery of School-based Educational Inclusion Measures, December 2003

The main conclusions and recommendations were

- There was a need to improve the methods of identification and selection to ensure the most appropriate targeting of resources for the schools in most need.
- There was a need for more effective targeting and deployment of existing financial and teaching resources by moving to a substantial degree, from the current programme-based approach to a more flexible, planned and integrated response to meeting the identified needs at local level.
- A range of supports needed to be delivered to teachers and schools to assist them in understanding and serving the needs of disadvantaged communities and in planning, monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of educational inclusion measures in order to ensure a real and sustainable impact on students and schools targeted.
- A transition plan needed to be developed by the Department to plan and manage the transition to the new integrated delivery model.

Appendix B Views of Principals on Sources and Effects of Disadvantage

In addition to overall economic and social pressures principals cited the following factors as giving rise to disadvantage at the level of families

- lack of understanding by parents and, as a result, by children of the benefits of education
- inability or unwillingness of parents to help the child with homework
- low expectations of parents for children
- family history of early school leaving
- lone parents
- family breakdown
- lack of budgeting skills or misuse of available money
- substance abuse
- lack of stimulation in the home.

At the level of the pupil the resultant disadvantage manifests in the form of

- absenteeism and punctuality issues
- poor academic performance
- behavioural problems
- low self esteem
- weak speech and vocabulary
- poor health and poor concentration
- inadequate food and clothing.

Appendix C Membership and Terms of Reference of the Advisory Board

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General established an advisory board to assist with this examination. In particular, the advisory board was consulted on

- the comprehensiveness of the scope of the examination, the issues identified as affecting educational disadvantage and the methodologies selected
- the evaluation criteria adopted
- the robustness of conclusions drawn from examination findings
- the educational merit of good practice exemplars collected during survey and school visits
- the presentation of examination findings.

The membership of the advisory board was as follows

Member	Organisation
Dr. Seamus McGuinness (Chair)	Trinity College Dublin
Ms Jacinta Stewart CEO	City of Dublin VEC
Mr Seán Ó Cearbhaill	Department of Education and Science (Inspectorate Division)

Appendix D Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan to be implemented from 2006 is designed to address educational exclusion and the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities from pre-school to completion of upper second level education (3 to 18 years).

The new action plan is intended to shift the emphasis away from individual initiatives, each addressing a particular aspect of the problem by adopting a multi-faceted and more integrated approach.

640 primary schools (comprising 320 urban/town schools and 320 rural schools) together with 200 second-level schools have been identified for inclusion in a new School Support Programme.

Supports will also continue to be provided for schools where the level of disadvantage is more dispersed. The action plan will be implemented on a phased basis over five years and will involve an additional annual investment of some €40m on full implementation. It will also involve the creation of about 300 additional posts across the education system generally.

The plan addresses the following

- improving identification of disadvantage — a standardised approach will enable the Department to target resources more effectively
- increasing Early Childhood Education provision in the most disadvantaged communities
- improving supports for pupils with low attainment levels in literacy and numeracy
- enhancing procedures for measuring the outcomes achieved from educational inclusion measures
- enhancing integration and partnership working, both within the education sector itself and cross-sectorally
- enhancing professional development supports for principals and school staff
- enhancing research and evaluation.

The key principle of early intervention underpins both the early childhood education measure and many of the literacy and numeracy measures being adopted under the plan.

A crucial aspect of the action plan will be a more developed planning process, implemented through the School Development Planning Initiative, and improved arrangements for measuring progress and outcomes at both local and national level.

The following are the key actions envisaged in the plan

- Targeted early childhood education provision for the primary school communities served by the first 180 urban/town primary schools included in the programme.
- Targeted reductions in class size to 20 in junior classes and 24 in senior classes in those schools.
- Access to teacher/co-ordinator support for any of the 320 rural primary schools in the School Support Programme not already in receipt of such support under a previous measure. These staff will each serve a cluster of schools and support the development of home, school and community linkages and literacy and numeracy measures.
- Additional financial supports for all schools in the programme.

- Literacy and numeracy supports including
 - A new advisory service at primary level
 - More access to initiatives such as Reading Recovery and Maths Recovery, which enable intensive individualised teaching to be provided to the lowest attaining pupils at an early stage, when intervention can be most effective
 - A new family literacy project.
- Extension of the following services to any of the 320 urban primary schools in the School Support Programme not already benefiting from them
 - Home School Community Liaison, which supports the involvement of parents, family members and the community in children’s education
 - School Completion Programme services, involving a wide range of supports provided on an individual and group basis to children and young people who may be at risk of early school leaving.
- Supporting recruitment and retention of school staff in schools serving disadvantaged communities by
 - Reducing thresholds for appointment of administrative principals – implementation for 320 urban/town primary schools over two years
 - Enhancing professional development supports
 - Implementing a new scheme of sabbatical leave from 2006-2007 – targeted at schools serving the most disadvantaged communities initially – 50 sabbaticals in any one year.
- Enhancing the role of Information and Communication Technologies in supporting the education of children and young people in disadvantaged communities.
- Promoting increased access to third-level in co-operation with the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education.

Appendix E Resources of School Completion Programme, 2003-2004

The retention plans for the 82 clusters were analysed to establish the breakdown of planned expenditure by activity. Information was not available on the breakdown of interventions between the primary and post-primary sectors. However, each SCP cluster could provide an estimate of their total expenditure by individual school. An analysis of the total amount provided to the clusters for application in both the primary and post-primary sectors is shown in Figure E.1.

Figure E.1 Breakdown of expenditure per retention plans, 2003-2004

Cost heading	Amount €'000	Amount €'000
General staff costs		
SCP coordinators and project workers employed on a full-time basis	4,227	
Staff employed on a part-time or sessional basis	3,989	
		8,216
Direct costs of Interventions		
Breakfast lunch and after school clubs	1,528	
Additional teachers and resources	1,055	
Holiday provision	939	
Drama, music sports	936	
Counselling therapy etc	890	
Attendance	404	
Other	763	
		6,515
Administration		1,643
Total planned expenditure		16,374

Note:

In the individual retention plans, amounts spent on salaries are in some cases included in personnel costs and, in others, the relevant costs are included in the overall cost of the intervention. As a result, the direct cost of interventions (€6.5m) includes a salaries element. In the case of some of the interventions, salaries account for the major portion of costs incurred.

Personnel costs in the retention plans include the salaries of the local coordinators, project workers and other staff employed on a part-time or seasonal basis and account for half of total expenditure. However, no breakdown of the activities carried out by these staff was available. A survey of the timetables of staff in five SCP clusters was carried out in order to establish the interventions being carried out by the staff employed and thereby estimate the cost of these interventions. The survey showed that approximately 58% of staff time was spent on delivering SCP supports with 42% of staff time going on administration. Figure E.2 analyses the proportion of these staff costs applied on direct delivery of supports.

Figure E.2 General staff costs applied on direct delivery of interventions in SCP clusters visited, 2003-2004

Cost heading	Proportion
After school activities	22%
One to one contact, mentoring and small group work	15%
Other activities ^a	21%
Proportion of salary costs applied on direct delivery of supports	58%

Note:

a This includes in school clubs, holiday support, sports, transfer programme and computers.

Figure E.3 analyses the proportion of staff costs applied on administration tasks.

Figure E.3 General staff costs applied on administration in SCP clusters visited, 2003-2004

Cost heading	Proportion
Coordinators administration	28%
Project worker administration	11%
Travel time	3%
Proportion of personnel costs applied on administration and travel time	42%

When the direct costs are aggregated with the proportion of staff time applied to programmes the estimated amount spent on delivery of supports is of the order of 69% with the balance being applied on administration. However, it is likely that the amount applied on supports is somewhat greater because it is not possible to accurately distinguish between pure administration and costs related to administering the projects. In particular, the Department has informed me that the estimated 42% of general staff costs incurred on administration includes a significant amount of resource time spent on recording and updating student profiles, maintaining attendance tracking records and in providing input to reports on individual children arising from case conferences and other inter-agency activities supporting the needs of the targeted students.

Appendix F Mandate and Strategy of the National Educational Welfare Board

The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 was fully commenced on 5 July 2002. This Act repealed the previous school attendance legislation and provided for the creation of a single national agency with responsibility for the delivery of a range of services to families, schools and young people.

The central statutory responsibilities assigned to the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) are

- to ensure that each child receives a minimum education
- to assist in the formulation and implementation of Government education policy.

Specifically, the NEWB was established to ensure that every child attends school regularly, or otherwise receives an education or participates in training. One of its key roles is to act as an advocate or support for a child, parent or guardian if there is a difficulty with school attendance or educational welfare.

Functions

In order to ensure that every child receives a minimum education, the NEWB is required to intervene at societal level, at the level of the wider educational system, the school system, and with individual families and children. The actions to be taken can include

- actions aimed at fostering positive public attitudes to education and increased awareness of the importance of school attendance
- development of a strong knowledge base in relation to the factors influencing school attendance, through research and the dissemination of research as the foundation for evidence-based attendance policy and strategy
- review of teacher education and guidance in relation to school attendance and provision of advice to the Minister
- provision of advice to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in relation to the impact of school curriculum on children's attendance and participation
- actions aimed at fostering within schools a climate that is conducive to maximising children's attendance and participation in school life
- specific school-based work to promote increased attendance, including the support, monitoring and assessment of school attendance strategies
- provision of advice and support to children and parents experiencing difficulties in relation to school attendance and behaviour
- the development of linkages and systems of co-ordination with key agencies whose work has dimensions relevant to school attendance.

Minimum Education

Under the Act, the NEWB, parents and schools are each charged with specific duties concerning children's school attendance and the right of children to access and to benefit from a minimum education. These duties form a central core of the work of the NEWB. They include

- Monitoring of school attendance, and taking a range of measures where children do not attend school and where parents breach their legal obligations in relation to school attendance

- Registration of children receiving education in a place other than a recognised school, and assessment of that education in order to ensure that the children are getting a certain minimum education
- Gathering data on school attendance and non-attendance, suspensions and expulsions
- Intervention in relation to proposed school expulsions
- Registration of young people under 18 who are in employment, and preparation of education and training plans with those young people.

Overview of Progress — NEWB assessment

Since its establishment in 2002, NEWB has utilised the resources provided in order to progress its service development as far as possible, on several levels, including the establishment of the Educational Welfare Service, the development of support services, data gathering and analysis for planning purposes, research and strategic planning. The NEWB has informed me that key areas of progress include

- A 4% improvement in attendance in 2004-2005 over the previous year in the areas where Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) were working intensively
- Regional structure established, with five regions across the country
- 73 Educational Welfare staff in place, delivering service in 26 locations, of which eight were opened in 2005
- Assessment and registration process established for children in independent primary schools and being educated at home
- Lo-Call Education Helpline set up for parents and schools, dealing with over 5,000 calls per year
- Almost 20,000 cases involving students with reported school attendance difficulties have been resolved since January 2004
- Guidance has issued to all schools outlining the arrangements for reporting student absences. A national website has been established to support schools in this work
- Comprehensive Research programme initiated
- Strategic Plan “Every Day Counts” developed to guide the NEWB’s development over the period 2005-2007.

Strategic Focus

The NEWB’s Strategic Plan 2005-2007 aims to build an organisation that can deliver on its duty to children, schools and families. The strategic goals adopted by the NEWB are as follows

- To implement a prevention strategy that will build a culture of attendance and participation among all children and families
- To make a strong evidence-based case to Government to fast-track the manpower requirements of the NEWB, build its capacity and enable it to deliver high quality educational welfare services
- To build strong partnerships and collaborative working practices with state and community organisations and increase the synergy with other educational investments, particularly in disadvantaged areas
- To ensure that resources and interventions maximise outcomes for children by developing evidence-based policy and practice
- To be a learning organisation that will support and develop its staff.

In the context of its Strategic Plan, the NEWB is examining the feasibility of designing and testing a model of best practice in the delivery of service. This model would pilot approaches to maximising attendance among all children, as well as addressing specific challenges experienced by certain population groups including Traveller children and children with special needs.

The NEWB has commenced a comprehensive research programme to support its strategic objectives, facilitate planning and service development and to help support schools in the areas of attendance and retention.