

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE: A TIMELY REPORT

Many of the issues highlighted in the January 1994 edition of Working Notes figure prominently in the Report on School Attendance and Truancy issued in April 1994 by the Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach.

The Report includes many interesting statistics. It notes that the average attendance of 90 per cent in national schools is not particularly good. This works out at about 16 days absence per year, but apart from that the figure is also likely to mask more serious absence patterns. If, as is quite possible, half the students are absent on average for only five days in the school year, then the remaining half would be absent on average for almost six weeks in the year.

Attendance problems are clustered in particular socio-economic groups. Of the children who came to the notice of attendance officers for the first time during the past year, only 13 per cent had a parent working outside the home. Fifty per cent came from one-parent families. Only 3 per cent lived in privately owned houses.

In line with concerns voiced in Working Notes the Report estimates that up to 8 per cent of primary school leavers may not transfer to second level schools at all. This would mean that about 5,000 twelve year olds drop out every year, an extremely worrying figure. In the absence of a formal registration-cum-tracking system (recommended in the Report) there is little hope of tackling this problem.

Is there a link between truancy and delinquency? Whatever about non-attendance leading to delinquency, there is no doubt that the majority of juvenile delinquents are persistent non-attenders. In St Joseph's Clonmel, only one boy out of 69 was said to be a regular attender at school.

Many of the reasons for absence cited in the report relate, as expected, to factors such as family stress, family break-up, or lack of parental control. Interesting questions are raised by another category of reasons given, viz.:

- parents' lack of confidence in the value of education;
- belief on the part of the child or the parents that the educational system had nothing of value to offer;
- family tradition of attending primary level only; and
- the perceived irrelevance of existing curricula.

Data from the recent ESRI publication on transitions to adulthood show clearly that children who stay on in school have a greater chance of employment regardless of their socio-economic background. This will not seem very surprising to middle-class people, but for some reason many parents and children from lower socio-economic groups remain unconvinced. It may be that they recognize that for a working-class person education is a much riskier investment than for a middle-class person, given that there are so many other factors besides education (such as accent, address, social class etc.) that determine employment chances. There is need for major research in this area, and, depending on the outcome of such research perhaps a national strategy for 'selling' education as a necessity in a technological age.

The Report twice adverts to a problem highlighted in Working Notes, namely, the lack of a school attendance service in some major centres of population, such as the newer Dublin suburbs. However, rather than urging for immediate legislative change to amend this, the Report puts its proposals regarding attendance officers into the context of the proposed Regional Education Councils. Since these are unlikely to be in place for some time, a chance to make an immediate impact on the situation has been missed.

The Report proposes putting increasing responsibility on parents for school attendance. While this is welcome, caution is also necessary. It is very difficult being a parent today, particularly in certain areas, and punishing parents who are already under stress may only make matters worse. What is certainly needed is more support services for families, and these will only become available if the 1991 Child Care Act is fully implemented and properly resourced.