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# Effective practices for reducing underachievement and early school leaving: insights from successful learning environments

Sarah Gardezi , Aideen Cassidy , Gerry McNamara , Joe O'Hara  and Martin Brown 

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, early school leaving (ESL) rates in the European Union have significantly decreased, from 17.6% in 2000 to 9.5% in 2023. ESL refers to individuals aged 18–24 who leave education without upper secondary qualifications. Ireland has excelled by cutting its ESL rate to 4% in 2023 through initiatives like the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Plan and TUSLA Education Support Services. These programs address inequities by offering guidance, alternative pathways, and promoting attendance and retention. Despite progress, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including migrants and Travelers, still face poorer educational outcomes. This research examines inclusive learning environments and their role in improving engagement, retention, and progression. Case studies from two high-performing designated DEIS schools illustrate how strong school leadership fosters effective interventions by building partnerships with families and communities. Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the study emphasizes the significance of interactions at the microsystem and mesosystem levels, supported by cohesive macro-level policies. The research identifies best practices for reducing inequities and improving outcomes across diverse educational contexts.

## IMPACT STATEMENT

This research explores how inclusive learning environments can help every student feel supported to learn, stay engaged in school, and reach their full potential. Focusing on two high-performing DEIS schools in Ireland, it shows how strong and caring school leadership can make a real difference—especially when schools work closely with families and local communities. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the study highlights the importance of the everyday relationships and supports surrounding students, from the classroom to the wider community, all reinforced by effective national education policies. The findings offer valuable guidance for schools, educators, and policymakers striving to reduce inequities in education. By adopting proven practices, we can create more inclusive school environments where all learners feel valued, capable, and empowered to succeed.

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## Introduction and background

Since early school leaving (ESL) was first highlighted as a key issue in 2000 at the European Council meeting in Lisbon, significant efforts have been made in the European Union (EU) to address the problem (Estêvão & Álvares, 2014; European Parliament, 2000). Over the past two decades, the rate of early school leavers, defined in EU policy documents as individuals aged 18–24 who leave the education system without attaining upper secondary qualifications, has dropped from 17.6% in 2000 to 9.5% in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). Despite this progress, almost 10% of young people still fail to complete education beyond the lower secondary level and do not pursue further education or training. Vulnerable groups, such as those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, young people with special needs, Roma, migrants, and refugees, are disproportionately represented among early school leavers (European

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Commission, 2017; Hippe & Jakubowski, 2018). In 2022, young non-EU citizens living in the EU were three times more likely than EU citizens to leave education early (Eurostat, 2024). High rates of early school leaving negatively impact economic growth by reducing workforce skill levels, increasing youth unemployment, and raising the risk of poverty and social exclusion (Torosyan et al., 2023). Recognizing these serious repercussions, the EU has set a target to reduce early school leaving to below 9% by 2030.

Ireland is among the countries that have achieved an ESL rate of as low as 4% in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). This is partly due to the strength of the economy and the availability of employment. However, it is also the result of targeted interventions, the most successful of which has been DEIS, a key policy initiative aimed at addressing educational disadvantage and reducing early school leaving. Introduced in 2005 and revised in 2017, DEIS is founded on the principle that all children should have equitable access to, participation in, and benefits from education, regardless of socio-economic background (Department of Education & Inspectorate, 2015). At the primary level, schools are categorized by need: DEIS Band 1 (most disadvantaged) and Band 2 (less severe disadvantage). At the post-primary level, approximately 27% of schools are designated as DEIS. Classification is based on criteria including parental unemployment, housing status, family size, single-parent households, Traveler background, and eligibility for educational supports.

DEIS schools receive targeted interventions such as additional funding (e.g. €180 million from 2022–2024), reduced pupil-teacher ratios, school meals, and staff professional development. It also provides enhanced guidance and counseling services for second-level schools, along with alternative, more flexible, vocationally-oriented programs such as the Junior Certificate School Program (JCSP), the Leaving Certificate Applied Program (LCA), and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Program (LCVP) (Department of Education, 2017). Notably, the JCSP is exclusively available to DEIS schools and specifically designed to retain students who are at risk of early school leaving (National Council for Curriculum & Assessment, 2010a). The LCVP and LCA, as alternatives to the more academically focused Leaving Certificate Established, offer practical and vocationally oriented curricula that prepare students for adult and working life (NCCA, 2010b) while now also providing pathways into higher and further education as well as vocational training. The Transition Year (TY) program, though not part of DEIS, is a significant intervention focused on students' holistic development. This optional year, situated between junior and senior cycles, emphasizes personal growth without exam pressures and provides students with opportunities to engage with the adult world and assume responsibilities within a supervised school setting.

Another significant initiative is the TUSLA<sup>1</sup> Education Support Services (TESS), which seeks to enhance attendance, participation, and retention in education (Department of Education & Inspectorate, 2015; TUSLA: Child and Family Agency, 2024). TESS encompasses several key components, including the Education Welfare Services, which aim to ensure consistent school attendance among school-aged children. The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) program is designed to improve children's academic outcomes by providing support to parents or guardians, encouraging their active involvement in their children's learning. Additionally, the School Completion Program (SCP) offers targeted support for primary and post-primary students who are at risk of early school leaving or who are currently disengaged from formal education and have not successfully transitioned to alternative educational pathways or employment opportunities (TUSLA: Child and Family Agency, 2024).

These services, along with various subsidiary measures, have contributed to improvements in attendance, retention, and academic achievement across all student cohorts, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Smyth et al., 2015; Weir & Kavanagh, 2018). Nevertheless, the educational outcomes of children and young people attending DEIS schools—or those from migrant, refugee, or Traveler backgrounds—continue to lag, albeit to a lesser extent, behind those of their more advantaged or native peers (Donohue et al., 2023; Fleming & Harford, 2023; Gilleece et al., 2020; McGinley & Keane, 2022; McGinnity et al., 2023; Nelis & Gilleece, 2023). The European Commission (2019) acknowledged the positive impact of these reforms, noting that DEIS schools have become 'positive forces for inclusion' (p. 15). However, recent studies (e.g. Gilleece et al., 2025; Gilleece & Clerkin, 2024) have criticized the program's design, arguing that it lacks a clearly defined theory of change. In particular, the program does not explicitly articulate the causal links between its intervention components and intended outcomes—a significant design weakness that hampers efforts to assess its true impact.

Several studies (e.g. Carroll, 2022; Downes et al., 2020; Doyle & Keane, 2019; O'Connell & Freeney, 2011) have explored both endogenous factors within the Irish education system and exogenous factors related to family and individual circumstances that contribute to underachievement and ESL, offering strategies to address these issues. Moreover, previous research (e.g. Carroll, 2022; Downes et al., 2020; Fleming, 2017; Harford et al., 2023) has evaluated the impact of national initiatives aimed at reducing underachievement and mitigating ESL, primarily through macro-level analyses. The observed reduction in ESL rates and the consistent improvement in the academic performance of DEIS schools suggest that while some schools may be underperforming, others are successfully supporting their students. However, there is a relative paucity of studies that specifically examine school-level strategies, which could provide insights into effective practices for removing learning barriers for all student cohorts.

This research aims to identify the elements of learning environments that foster inclusion, resulting in improved student engagement with school and learning, higher progression rates, and lower dropout rates. Using a case study research design, the researchers examined two DEIS schools, a post-primary and a primary Band 1 school, both demonstrating exceptional student progression rates. Focusing on these outlier schools allows a deeper understanding of the enabling factors and practices that contribute to student success in environments typically associated with educational disadvantage. Grounded in the positive deviance approach (Sternin et al., 2010), the research emphasizes learning from schools that succeed against the odds, offering valuable insights for broader school improvement efforts. By employing qualitative methods and engaging multiple stakeholders—including school leaders, teachers, parents, and students—the study explores how context-specific prevention and intervention strategies influence student outcomes and help reduce early school leaving.

The study addresses the following research question:

What are the characteristics of learning environments that offer effective opportunities to reduce underachievement and ESL?

The next section of this paper highlights Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and discusses how this framework elucidates the factors influencing student engagement and retention. It synthesizes existing research on practices and interventions that have been shown to improve student progression rates. This is followed by a detailed methodology section, which includes the selection criteria for choosing the two case study schools and the rationale for their selection. Subsequently, the paper comprehensively reviews effective practices identified in both schools. In the discussion and conclusion section, we will analyze the findings in the context of existing literature, assess the policy and practice implications, and propose future research directions. This study is a part of the Horizon Europe Project: Policies and Practices Based on Scientific Research for Reducing Underachievement and Early School Leaving in Europe: SCIREARLY.

## Literature review

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) provides a framework that explains the interaction of different environmental layers and the complex network of relationships that influence child development and, of course, learning. These layers include immediate environments like family and school and broader influences such as cultural norms, laws, and traditions. Bronfenbrenner outlines five interlocking environmental systems which influence the development of young people: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

The microsystem consists of the direct interactions a child has with their family, school, and peers. The mesosystem involves the connections between different microsystems, emphasizing their interdependence. The exosystem includes wider influences like local government policies and media, while the macrosystem encompasses broader societal factors such as economic policies and cultural values. The chronosystem reflects the impact of time, considering life transitions and changes over the child's development. Thus, the theory highlights the significance of interconnected environmental systems in shaping a child's growth, from family relationships to societal structures (Paquette & Ryan, 2001).

Though all ecological systems impact a child's learning, the microsystem is particularly influential as it involves the child's immediate surroundings and experiences, such as family dynamics and educational settings. Guy-Evans (2024) explains the connection between Bronfenbrenner's theory and educational

practice, highlighting the importance of effective communication and collaboration between teachers and parents in enhancing a child or young person's ecological systems within educational environments. Concomitantly, teachers should be mindful of the diverse social and economic backgrounds of their students and the circumstances their families may be experiencing. Building a positive partnership between parents and teachers can lead to better developmental and learning outcomes for children. Additionally, it is crucial for children and young people to actively engage in their learning, both academically and socially, by collaborating with peers and participating in meaningful learning experiences. Thus, an effective learning environment reflects Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on interconnected systems—family, school, and community—ensuring that educational practices are responsive to the various contexts influencing each student's development.

A dynamic and engaging learning environment integrates the psychological, social, cultural, and physical dimensions that influence the learning process and shape student motivation and achievement. Such an environment also functions as a collaborative space where students and teachers co-create experiences and establish mutual expectations (Rusticus et al., 2023). These characteristics align closely with the model of student engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2016), which distinguishes between three dimensions of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Behavioral engagement involves persistence, participation in academic and social activities, and positive conduct. Emotional engagement refers to students' interest, sense of belonging, and relationships with teachers, classmates, and the school. Cognitive engagement pertains to the willingness to invest effort into complex problems, self-regulation, and the use of deep learning strategies. These three dimensions are interconnected, with each influencing the others. Bond (2020) further extends this understanding by introducing a social-Behavioral dimension of engagement, which encompasses student interaction with teachers and peers, active participation, enthusiasm, and enjoyment in learning. An effective and engaging learning environment sustains student engagement, thereby reducing the risk of disengagement, which is a significant predictor of dropout (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

The culture of a school plays a vital role in shaping the learning environment (Rusticus et al., 2023; Smyth & Hattam, 2002). Smyth and Hattam (2002) present the concept of the 'cultural geography of high schools'. They delineate three distinct cultures: aggressive, passive, and active. The aggressive culture signifies a hostile environment where non-exemplary students are actively pushed out. Conversely, the passive culture reflects indifference and, a lack of support or encouragement for students to remain in school. The active culture, favored by students, entails a specialized and intensive educational approach aimed at engaging and retaining students.

Research suggests several other key characteristics of successful learning environments, for example physical factors like comfortable, accessible classrooms with adequate resources are crucial (Castro-Pérez & Morales-Ramírez, 2015; Habsy et al., 2023; Temli Durmuş, 2016). The classroom setting is crucial for fostering a positive learning environment, as it influences student motivation and creates a welcoming atmosphere. Playful activities are seen as effective for both learning and enjoyment. An ideal classroom should be calm, participatory, and esthetically pleasing, contributing to positive emotional states that enhance learning. Such environments promote attention, concentration, interest, and a sense of security for students (Castro-Pérez & Morales-Ramírez, 2015). Temli Durmuş (2016) stresses the availability of learning resources and classroom fixtures that prompt students to self-directed learning.

Equally important are the socio-emotional aspects of education, such as supportive relationships, motivation, and a sense of inclusion (Rusticus et al., 2023; Habsy et al., 2023). Interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers play a crucial role in students' engagement in meaningful learning. Through interviews with school children, Adderley et al. (2015) identified four interrelated themes—perceived unfairness, shouting, loneliness, and seating plans—that impact these relationships. Perceived unfairness undermines teacher-student and peer relationships, while respectful communication fosters positive interactions. Loneliness, often experienced outside the classroom, requires attention from teachers and staff. Seating arrangements influence students' ability to form and maintain productive relationships with peers, which in turn affects learning. These themes are essential to advancing inclusive practices in schools and enhancing student engagement.

An effective learning environment is significantly influenced by a flexible curriculum and pedagogy that addresses diverse needs through collaboration among teachers, students, and stakeholders (Debasu



& Yitayew, 2024). Integrating equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) into the syllabus is crucial for fostering an inclusive learning environment and achieving goals related to cultural competence. The adoption of an EDI mindset within the curriculum and syllabus is imperative (Fuentes et al., 2021). The successful implementation of the curriculum relies on active teacher involvement, the establishment of clear teaching and learning objectives, and the provision of constructive feedback, all of which play a vital role in promoting student success. The learning experience is further enriched by ensuring opportunities for equal participation, autonomy, empowerment, and fair evaluation (Habsy et al., 2023).

School dropout or school completion should not be viewed as isolated events, but rather as the outcomes of extended processes characterized by either disengagement or sustained engagement (Brown et al., 2025). To effectively reduce disengagement and lower dropout rates, it is crucial to implement targeted interventions across various contexts—including families, schools, peer groups, and communities—that foster and reinforce student engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Tracey et al. (2016), in their community-based study on the engagement and retention of young rural Aboriginal Australians, argue that educational environments and systems often perpetuate marginalization for such children. Their research highlights several factors highly valued by the community, including individualized support, cultural security, and active community involvement, which are essential for ensuring student engagement and improving learning outcomes.

Gordon (2023) outlines ten dimensions of a successful school, defining these dimensions as interrelated properties, features, or qualities of a school. The ten dimensions include care, service, trust, democratic community, equity grounded in equality, justice and peace, symbols and ceremonies, freedom and creativity, holistic development, and vision. Schools that exhibit several of these dimensions typically foster a positive culture and learning environment. The sense of community within the school often extends to positive school-family and school-community relationships. Moreover, students in schools where these dimensions of success are present tend to stay motivated, remain positively engaged, and are more likely to achieve.

Previous studies have predominantly employed interviews or surveys with tutors, managers, teachers, principals, or students' parents/carers to gather insights into their expectations or understanding of learning environments (Adderley et al., 2015; Castro-Pérez & Morales-Ramírez, 2015; Temli Durmuş, 2016; Tracey et al., 2016). Some research studies have focused on literature reviews to explore these topics (Debasu & Yitayew, 2024). However, this study diverges from merely examining perceptions or expectations by conducting an in-depth investigation of learning environments that have proven effective in reducing underachievement, improving retention, and enhancing student progression rates. In contrast to previous research, which often examines individual elements of educational practices in isolation, this study adopts a comprehensive approach by incorporating the perspectives of all key stakeholders, including school leadership at various levels, teachers, students, and parents. In addition, it systematically reviews school documents and conducts direct observations of school practices to evaluate the implementation of key components contributing to successful learning environments. Utilizing a case study design, this research presents these environments as exemplary models of effective educational practice. By providing a holistic view of educational settings where students are demonstrably thriving, this study offers a more integrated and practical understanding of the factors that contribute to academic success.

## Methodology

A case study research design was intentionally selected due to its inherent flexibility, which allows for the integration of multiple data collection methods to effectively address the research objectives, particularly in conducting an in-depth examination of a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The selection of cases in this study was guided by specific criteria, including the school's location in a low socio-economic area and its service to students from vulnerable backgrounds, such as those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, Roma/Traveler, migrants, or refugees. Moreover, schools were considered based on their implementation of notable initiatives, methodologies, or projects that effectively engaged vulnerable students. Eligible schools were required to demonstrate a significant reduction in underachievement and dropout rates over the past 5–10 years, with a minimum reduction of 10%, and to currently perform below the European average dropout rate of 9%, while also maintaining high

progression and attendance rates. The research is exploratory, aiming to investigate the characteristics and practices of these schools that foster inclusion, address underachievement, and enhance retention, aligning with Swedberg's (2020) explanation that an exploratory study should provide valuable insights.

Case Study One was conducted in a DEIS Band 1 primary school situated in a county town characterized by a notably high proportion of non-Irish residents, constituting 16.3% of the population, compared to the national average of 12% (Central Statistics Office, 2022). The school itself reflects this demographic diversity, with 55% of its student body comprising individuals from immigrant or refugee backgrounds, 15% identifying as members of the Traveler community, and 33% as White Irish, collectively representing over 30 nationalities. The overall student attendance rate over the past two years has been approximately 90%.

Case Study Two focused on a DEIS post-primary<sup>2</sup> voluntary school located in a suburban area of North Dublin, marked by low socio-economic status. The school has a student body where over 10% come from migrant or refugee backgrounds. In terms of academic performance, 23% of students in the Leaving Certificate examinations achieved an H1 grade in one or more subjects, 19% scored over 500 points<sup>3</sup> in the 2022 state examinations, and two students attained the maximum score of 625 points. Over the years, the progression rate to third-level education has significantly increased, from 14% in 2007 to 84% in 2022, alongside a school completion rate of 96%. These percentages surpass the figures reported by the Central Statistics Office of Ireland and the Department of Education. According to the CSO, nearly 62.3% of individuals aged 25–34 in Ireland held a third-level qualification in 2022 (CSO, 2024). Furthermore, the Department of Education reports a retention rate of 93.2% for pupils sitting the Leaving Certificate examination in 2022 (Department of Education, 2023).

Prior to conducting school visits, ethical approval was obtained from the DCU<sup>4</sup> research ethics committee. Schools were thoroughly informed about the level of engagement required, and informed consent and assent forms were distributed to school leaders to be signed by participants. Detailed information regarding the interviews and participants in both schools is provided in Tables 1 and 2.

Semi-structured individual and group interviews were conducted with all key stakeholders, as detailed in Tables 1 and 2. Participants for the focus groups were selected by the school principal, ensuring representation from a range of perspectives. During a guided tour of each school by the research team, field notes were meticulously recorded to document the distinctive features of the school displays and environments. A thorough review and analysis were conducted of school documents, including the DEIS plan, inspection reports, and evaluations of school improvement plans. Additionally, student activities were observed, and in Case Study Two, some lessons incorporating team teaching were also examined. The interview questions and protocol were developed by the SCIREARLY consortium.

All interviews and observations were carefully documented, and the interview recordings were precisely transcribed. The research team then conducted a thorough review of the transcripts, field notes, and observation notes, and subsequently convened a meeting to collectively discuss and analyze the data. Through this process, the team identified the major school practices and examined their implementation and impact, as described in the data. Using these as theoretical codes relevant examples from the transcripts were carefully selected for inclusion in the paper, ensuring comprehensive coverage and a meaningful representation of the findings.

## Analysis and findings

Both case study schools employ a comprehensive array of prevention and intervention strategies aimed at enhancing engagement, promoting inclusivity, and addressing issues of disengagement, underachievement and low attendance. Due to the constraints of this paper, it is not feasible to discuss all the practices and evidence-based examples of successful learning environments that incorporate these mitigating factors in detail. Consequently, three overarching categories have been established to group and analyze these practices collectively.

- National Initiatives: Integration and Execution
- School-Based Initiatives: Innovation and Impact
- Leadership Excellence: Guiding Success in Schools

**Table 1.** Case study 1 participants.

Interviews	Participants
Senior Leadership Team	1 Principal and 2 Assistant Principals
Special Needs Assistants	3 SNAs
Parents Focus Group 1	4 parents
Parents Focus Group 2	5 parents
Teachers' Focus Group 1	5 teachers
Teachers' Focus Group 2	4 teachers
Home School Community Liaison Coordinator	1 HSCL coordinator
Nurture Room Coordinator	1 coordinator
Students Focus Group	5 students (a mixed group – 2 boys & 3 girls; age 10–12 year olds)

**Table 2.** Case study 2 participants.

Interviews	Participants
Senior Leadership Team	Principal and Deputy Principal
Parents Focus Group	5 parents
Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Coordinator	1 LCA
Student Focus Group	6 students (mixed group 12 – 18-year-olds)
Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinator	1 HSCL Coordinator
Transition Year (TY) Coordinator	1 TY Coordinator
Additional Educational Needs (AEN) Coordinator	1 AEN Coordinator
DEIS Coordinator	1 DEIS Coordinator
Junior Cycle School Program (JCSP) Coordinator	1 JCSP Coordinator
Guidance and Counseling Team	3 Guidance Counselors
Meeting with Teachers (informal)	10 teachers

## National initiatives: integration and execution

### Case study 1

Being a DEIS Band 1 primary school, and in line with requirements for all DEIS schools, this case study site has developed a DEIS action plan that addresses specific areas for improvement<sup>5</sup>. This plan must be evaluated annually, with necessary modifications and amendments made based on the findings. This school is diligently adhering to the Department of Education's guidelines. The DEIS action plan, while outlining the current position of the school and the goals it aims to achieve, is designed to ensure that the educational needs of children from disadvantaged communities are met. It serves as the Department of Education's social inclusion strategy to support children who are at risk of, or experiencing, educational disadvantage<sup>6</sup>.

The principal discussed the process by which the school community is involved in the development of the improvement plan. She emphasized that, given the school's diversity, her primary focus is on fostering parental involvement and building strong links with the community. She stated:

You can look at parental and community-wide development. Obviously, retention, progression, and attendance are very important. Additionally, we have interventions for literacy and numeracy, along with additional supports for those areas. (Principal)

As a DEIS school, support from the TUSLA Education Support Service, including the HSCL, Education Welfare, and the SCP, plays a vital role. The collaboration between school staff, the HSCL coordinator, and the SCP coordinator ensures that parents and children feel valued and supported, emphasizing well-being and inclusion beyond academics. The HSCL coordinator stressed the importance of bridging divides to address families' needs:

You have to break down barriers, so they feel comfortable enough to share their situation with you. Sometimes, what they're going through is truly horrific. Some of the challenges our families face are absolutely awful. (HSCL)

The strong connection of the HSCL and the SCP with parents and the community is clear. Parents often referred to the HSCL coordinator by her first name, reflecting a relationship that goes beyond professionalism. The HSCL's role extends to personal care and support, often resembling that of a family member.



One parent shared how the HSCL took the initiative to deliver fresh fruits and vegetables to their home:

ABC [HSCL's name anonymized] even brings like bags of fruit and veg to your door. ...I don't think the teachers from this school can actually do any more. There's only so much you can do. (a parent)

Another parent shared how the HSCL provided emotional support on a particularly difficult day:

... everything was kind of hit like and I was having a really bad day, and she [HSCL] just came over to see if I was okay. (a parent)

Extra- and co-curricular activities play a crucial role in fostering cohesion within a diverse student body. Research by Elbe et al. (2017) demonstrated that regular participation in physical sports activities among primary school children not only enhances their enjoyment but also strengthens their sense of cohesion. Engagement in these activities is also instrumental in the development of a student's identity and contributes to a greater sense of belonging and well-being (Winstone et al., 2022). The school participates in various extra- and co-curricular initiatives supported by the Department of Education and other governmental and non-governmental organizations, including the Amber Flag, Blue Star Flag, Active School Flag, Green Flag Program, and Creative School Program.

The Amber Flag initiative, administered by Pieta, an Irish charity, focuses on promoting positive mental health and well-being within communities through collaboration, knowledge sharing, and empowerment. The school integrates this initiative into various subjects of the primary curriculum, such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Arts Education, and PE, guiding students on their journey toward well-being. The Blue Star Flag Program is an educational initiative designed for primary school pupils across Ireland, aiming to deepen their understanding of the European Union (EU) and its impact on Irish citizens. This program involves pupils, teachers, parents, and the wider community in classroom projects and activities, encouraging a creative exploration of European cultures and the EU.

The Active School Flag, supported by the Department of Education and Healthy Ireland as part of the National Physical Activity Plan, provides schools with a structured framework to promote physical education and an active school community. A student explained, 'So active schools, they do stuff to make people be active. Like, if you look behind you, you'll see active school run around. Each class has to get to a different destination. My class is running to Vilnius, Lithuania. The younger classes, like junior infants, are running to closer countries to Ireland. Like they're running to the UK'.

The Green Flag Program, coordinated by An Taisce (the National Trust for Ireland), is an environmental education initiative for primary schools. It aims to educate and empower students to address environmental issues and promote sustainability within their schools and communities. The program covers themes, such as waste management, energy and water conservation, biodiversity, and climate change. Reflecting on the school's involvement, one student shared, 'Green School Committee, they try to help our school make the world a greener place'.

The Creative Schools Project, a major initiative of the Creative Ireland Program, seeks to prioritize arts and creativity in children's lives. Led by the Arts Council in collaboration with the Department of Education and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media, this initiative offers children opportunities to develop their artistic and creative abilities, fostering communication, collaboration, imagination, and inventiveness. A group of students described their experiences: 'So Creative Schools is like a committee that tries to express art in different ways. We actually had Creative Week. So basically, that week we had lots of art stuff to do. So, we made these kind of flowers, every class made them ... we also did French bracelets'.

Being a DEIS Band 1 school, the school has access to the Reading Recovery Program<sup>7</sup>, an early literacy intervention for six-year-old children whose literacy skills are significantly below their peers after the first year of schooling. This short-term intervention is offered to senior infants and/or first-class students, requiring a trained and licensed teacher to administer it. The program provides individualized support through daily 30-minute one-to-one lessons over 12 to 20 weeks, tailored to each child's needs based on the teacher's assessments and observations. A mother mentioned how her children benefited from this program,

My children are up there with their reading like I have a seven-year-old in here, and she can read a book for a good thing ... She will read that like that's a big book, she will read the big words.

As part of its DEIS Band 1 designation, the school also benefits from the Math Recovery<sup>8</sup> Training, a unique initiative under the DEIS program. Unlike the individualized Reading Recovery Program, Math Recovery offers a flexible framework that can be adapted for individual, group, or whole-class instruction. It focuses on enhancing children's number knowledge, comprehension, and problem-solving skills through a profile-based assessment that evaluates their numerical abilities. This intervention supports not only children facing difficulties with numbers but also those who are average or advanced in mathematical concepts.

We get strong support, like Reading Recovery and Maths Recovery. While Maths Recovery has strict entry criteria, its teaching methods help the whole class. Reading Recovery is more individualized, with one-on-one sessions tailored to each child's reading level. There's no one-size-fits-all—we adapt to each student's needs. (Principal)

The interventions implemented by the school are grounded in scientific research and have effectively improved students' literacy and numeracy skills through consistent engagement. Evidence further suggests that participation in extracurricular activities is associated with positive outcomes for children and adolescents. Specifically, structured leisure activities, such as club and sports participation, correlate with higher academic achievement, better psychosocial development, and enhanced social competence (Fletcher et al., 2003). These activities play a crucial role in students' adjustment to their learning environment and foster a heightened sense of belonging.

## Case study 2

Case Study 2 has implemented various national initiatives, with the most prominent and comprehensive being the DEIS Plan. As a DEIS-designated post-primary institution, the school developed a detailed DEIS plan, which outlined broad objectives that were prominently displayed throughout classrooms and corridors. The DEIS status provides the school with access to a variety of supports and resources, the most significant of which are the HSCL service and the SCP. These services are dedicated to fostering strong relationships between the school and the families of its students. The HSCL facilitates educational initiatives for parents, aiming to empower them to actively engage in their children's educational experiences. The HSCL Coordinator discussed the Parents' Plus Program she conducts for parents, noting that

These students might be at risk of not completing their education due to various needs, whether emotional or academic. The [Parents Plus Program] offers strategies for managing their children at home, where they spend most of their time. (HSCL)

The SCP is responsible for managing after school and extracurricular activities, working in collaboration with local communities, youth clubs, sports associations, and various statutory agencies (TUSLA, 2004a, 2004b). The SCP's role is to create an environment that encourages and equips young people to engage actively in their formal education and other developmental activities within the school setting. This is achieved through the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of educational welfare initiatives tailored to the needs of specific groups, encompassing both in-school and community settings, and spanning school hours, after-school periods, and holidays.

Among the national interventions aimed at providing multiple pathways for students, particularly those at risk of early school leaving, the JCSP and the LCA stand out as particularly significant. The JCSP has been specifically designed to offer targeted support to students who are at risk of prematurely exiting the educational system due to additional needs, challenges at home, or disadvantaged backgrounds. This initiative is aligned with the standard Junior Cycle syllabus, ensuring that all participants are adequately prepared for the required examinations. The JCSP focuses on enhancing students' success and self-esteem by offering a customized curriculum and assessment framework. In addition, participants in the JCSP receive personalized profiles from the Department of Education, officially documenting their academic achievements<sup>9</sup>.

The JCSP Coordinator explained the program aims to keep students in school by offering extra support and engaging activities. The school's JCSP serves around 35–40 students and has a clear system for

identifying participants, 'with input from the homeschool liaison, primary teachers, school completion team, SEN coordinator, and SST [School Support Team]'<sup>10</sup>, (JCSP Coordinator).

However, teachers retain considerable discretion in the selection process. The dedicated JCSP coordinator works closely with teachers regarding profiling, initiatives, and the JCSP literacy and numeracy strategy. She also produces a regular newsletter to showcase and celebrate the students' achievements and the various activities in which they are involved.

The LCA serves as an alternative to the traditional Leaving Certificate, designed to prepare young people for the workforce and adult life. The LCA is a two-year pre-vocational program offered at the senior cycle alongside the traditional Leaving Certificate Established. This program is tailored to the needs and interests of its participants, employing a variety of teaching methodologies and making extensive use of local community resources, with particular attention to the needs of the surrounding region. As explained by the NCCA, it is essential to acknowledge that individuals vary significantly in how they process, assimilate, and recall information<sup>11</sup>.

Approximately 10% of students in the fifth and sixth years of the school are enrolled in the LCA program, which is structured into four half-year sessions over two years, with a stronger emphasis on continuous assessment rather than end-of-year exams. Students who leave the program before completion receive a record of their experiences. For those seeking college entry without a Leaving Certificate or sufficient points for their desired course, the Further Education and Training route provides an alternative pathway. The LCA curriculum is centered around three main components: Vocational Preparation, Vocational Education, and General Education<sup>12</sup>.

The school offers a strong Transition Year (TY) program, with 140 of 160 Junior Cycle graduates opting in. TY bridges junior and senior cycles, offering a broad, hands-on curriculum including work placements, study tours, and skill development. The TY coordinator shared that the program includes core, elective, and Leaving Cert sampling modules. Student surveys at year-end guide module selection, making each year's program tailored to the cohort's interests.

I meet with the parents, so I've already had meetings with the third-year parents, and I've met with third-year students already. I try to provide them with as much information as possible, so they know what they're getting into. I have students who will talk to the students and such, and it's early enough in the third year. (TY coordinator)

Research also indicates that the active involvement of both students and their parents in decision-making is essential for the success of transition programs (Bagnall et al., 2024; van Rens et al., 2018).

The TY coordinator outlined the wide range of TY modules and expressed pride in the success of community-based ones, saying they are effective because 'they provide students with an experience that is entirely different from what they are accustomed to in junior cycle, yet aligns with what they will encounter in senior cycle. It's an experience they carry forward with them'.

Both students and teachers frequently referenced the Uganda Immersion Program. This initiative aims to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the educational system and the lived experiences of young people in Uganda. Participants travel to Uganda and engage in an immersive experience by attending a secondary school alongside peers of the same age. Additionally, the Friendly Voices Choir, designed for older members of the community, collaborates with students to create a joint musical ensemble, fostering intergenerational interaction.

Like many post-primary schools that have Pastoral Care/Student Support Teams (SST), which include school staff including the Principal, HSCL, Guidance Counselor, and Learning Support Teacher, as well as external agents such as the Public Health Nurse and Youth Worker, the case study school also has a very active and effective SST. This team meets regularly to coordinate support for at-risk students (European Commission, 2013). The Department of Education provides guidelines to help schools establish and develop these teams, which address students' academic, social, emotional, and Behavioral needs. Under the Continuum of Support plan, this school implements tiered activities: the first tier for all students, the second for some, and the third for a select few.

Students are also informed about whom to seek help from when needed:

You'd have your form teacher, and that would be just for your class, and that would be for your specific class, and then you'd have your year head, and she'd be in charge of every form. You can go to them as well, but they're there for bigger things, like attendance, and if you want to go out or anything. (a Student)

... a lot of teachers would stay behind after school for like an hour and they do extra classes. (a Student)

In both Case Study 1 and Case Study 2, the schools demonstrate a committed integration and implementation of national initiatives. Their practices reveal consistent interactions within children's microsystems, as school leaders actively work to bridge the gap between school and family life. This approach fosters robust engagement from both students and parents. Notably, co-curricular and extracurricular programs not only bolster students' sense of belonging but also strengthen the links between the microsystem and mesosystem, aligning them with the broader macrosystem encompassing the departments of education, culture, sports, and arts.

## School-based initiatives: innovation and impact

### Case study 1

School leaders not only diligently implement national interventions and practices but also proactively initiate measures to enhance children's learning and well-being. The principal recognizes the Nurture Room Program<sup>13</sup> as a particularly effective initiative for enhancing children's learning within the school environment. This program targets primary school students who face challenges in mainstream classrooms and are at risk of academic underperformance. It is specifically designed to combat educational disadvantage by focusing on students' social and behavioral needs, while also recognizing teachers' critical role in fostering educational success. The program operates on the principle of providing short-term, targeted interventions to address non-cognitive barriers that impede student learning.

The principal emphasized that the Nurture Room Program goes beyond teaching literacy and numeracy; it prioritizes the emotional development and well-being of the students. The program is aimed at building emotional resilience, awareness, and coping strategies, ensuring that students feel supported and capable of navigating various life situations. Within the safe space of the school environment, children are encouraged to explore and address their emotions. This support is seamlessly integrated into the school's learning support framework, which is managed by a dedicated team of resource teachers. The Nurture Program serves students across all grade levels, from junior infants to sixth class, with a unique focus on emotional literacy rather than traditional academic instruction.

A parent shared a positive account of her daughter's experience in the nurture room,

I have a daughter dear Amelia [pseudonym], who requires a lot of support with various tasks. Now, she's given breaks when needed, especially when she becomes hyperactive or frustrated. These breaks, often involving a tea break, allow her to recharge before returning to learning activities. I've noticed significant progress in her writing skills over the past two years, which is truly remarkable.

The principal also highlighted that the school has invested in the Roots of Empathy<sup>14</sup> initiative as well. The Roots of Empathy program, implemented in primary schools, encourages children to recognize and empathize with the vulnerability and humanity of a visiting baby, who is accompanied by a parent and a trained Roots of Empathy Instructor. This program uses a specialized curriculum to guide these interactions and has been shown to reduce aggression among students by enhancing their social-emotional competence and fostering empathy. One teacher explained, 'We've introduced a wonderful practice to cultivate empathy in our students. A baby visits our school, and two of our teachers, who have received specialized training, conduct lessons with the children to help them understand the baby's needs and support its emotional development'.

Roots of Empathy and Nurture Room Programs are designed and planned by NGOs, and the school has adopted them. Some initiatives, however, are designed and planned by the school itself. For instance, to facilitate the smooth transition of primary school students to secondary school, the school implements the Stepping Over to Secondary School Program for all 6th-class students. Both students and parents have acknowledged the benefits they or their children have received from this program. One student shared, 'In our classroom, since we're in sixth class, we're getting ready for secondary

school. When we finish a subject, we have this table at the back of the classroom where we can go and look at secondary school books and the junior pages and get ready for that’.

The school also offers a thriving after-school program that goes beyond homework help, providing meals and a variety of extracurricular activities and sports. Along with dedicated volunteer teachers, the program benefits from community department hires who bring specialized classes like art.

The principal explained the goal of this initiative:

First and foremost, our priority is getting students into school. However, beyond mere attendance, we emphasize active participation. Merely having a child present doesn’t guarantee they’re benefiting from their education. It’s crucial that students not only attend but also enjoy being at school, actively engage in learning, and foster positive relationships with their peers. To support this, like many other schools, we offer after-school support programs to ensure students have the resources they need to thrive. (Principal)

Both parents and students appreciate these after-school programs. A student shared their thoughts:

I like how they organize a lot of things like after-school activities. We used to have a choir but the season’s ended. We used to have girls’ football, boys football, we used to have Gaelic as well. (a student)

## Case study 2

The school principal has taken several initiatives to promote a positive learning environment, fostering a culture where leadership actively supports and encourages teachers and staff to assume various critical roles, such as Year Heads, Home-School Liaison Coordinator, JCSP Coordinator, LCA Coordinator, Transition Year Coordinator, Additional Educational Needs Coordinator, and Guidance Counselors. Additionally, the leadership prioritizes ongoing professional development by offering relevant training, ensuring that staff remain current with best practices. This comprehensive approach has significantly enhanced the collective expertise and skills within the school, enriching the educational experience and promoting academic excellence and holistic development.

One Guidance Counselor shared her experience:

I qualified two years ago [as a guidance counselor], so I’ve been working full-time as a guidance counselor for the last two years. My other role here is Transition Year Coordinator. They dovetail nicely together with a lot of crossovers in pastoral work. Those are my two main roles at the moment, while I’m still teaching a bit of sixth-year Irish. We all have our fingers in a few different pots.

The principal highlighted two pivotal programs, the Trinity Access Program (TAP) and College for Every Student (CFES), which he described as transformative for his students. TAP aims to equip students with the knowledge, networks, and skills necessary to make informed decisions about their educational futures. It also supports teachers and schools in fostering collaborative and reflective learning environments that help students pursue higher education. Reflecting on the impact of TAP, he noted, ‘We established a connection with the Trinity Access Program in 2007. Prior to that, we had no affiliations with universities or colleges, so that was significant – it was a game changer for us’.

The school is also the first secondary school outside the U.S. to achieve the prestigious CFES School of Distinction status. CFES fosters a college-going culture by making higher education an attainable reality for students. The principal highlighted the CFES program’s influence:

In 2013, we developed a link with the American NGO College for Every Student, and that was a real game-changer here. We stopped calling ourselves a DEIS school and became the College for Every Student school. We mirrored much of their 20 years of experience in getting underrepresented students into third-level education. Initiatives like mentoring, pathways to college, and leadership through service transformed the school.

The school’s activity calendar is filled with events organized under CFES and TAP, led by the Guidance and Counseling Department. The department, comprising three counselors and guided by the principal—a trained counselor with community ties—supports a peer mentoring program. This program pairs each student with a senior mentor (student) until the sixth year when they transition to exclusive guidance from the counselors. Peer mentoring spans at least three years, fostering strong relationships among students, with ongoing access to guidance from the first to fifth year.

Students expressed strong appreciation for the guidance and counseling services available in their school. As one student reflected: 'Can we go to college or pursue whatever the best thing is for us? I think the majority of people know because we have guidance counselors. They help us if we're worried about points and stuff, we can go to them at any time to talk to them about it. And the fact that they're there is really comforting'. This highlights the perceived accessibility and reassurance provided by the guidance service, particularly in navigating academic pressures and future pathways.

Additionally, counselors provide guidance lessons to first, second, and third-year students, and Career and College readiness modules for fourth and fifth-year students. They organize a variety of activities such as College Awareness Week, information sessions on college applications, CV workshops, career fairs, study skills workshops, subject choice information evenings, guidance with course selection, expert speaker events, and psychometric testing, among others.

Team teaching is a key practice at the school, serving as a support mechanism for learning. In Ireland, secondary schools have been encouraged to adopt team teaching to support AEN students within mainstream classrooms, reducing the need for withdrawal from lessons. This school has prioritized in-class support through team teaching and teacher assistance. The Additional Needs Coordinator explained the discreet identification of students with additional needs and the strategic allocation of team teachers:

It's about discreetly identifying who has additional needs in your class and figuring out the team teachers required. Team teaching means kids aren't embarrassed by being pulled out; it's about supporting them in the mainstream.

This approach facilitates differentiated instruction by offering additional support to students who are struggling, while permitting others to advance according to their pace. Moreover, team teaching encourages collaboration among teachers, helping to alleviate burnout and improve job satisfaction, thereby promoting a positive learning environment for all students (Ploessl et al., 2010). Effective time management by the school leadership allows teachers additional hours to support learning through team teaching.

In addition to team teaching, teachers use various strategies to maintain student engagement, such as integrating technology with each student using an iPad, group work, interactive tasks, reflective questioning, and research-based presentations. Open dialogue between teachers and students fosters a comfortable atmosphere, while 'differentiation by support' ensures AEN Assistants are available to help students without disrupting the lesson pace.

School leaders prioritize strong relationships with parents, engaging them through activities like coffee mornings, language classes, and Yoga sessions. The principal highlighted this commitment, noting the involvement of 35 parents, teachers, and Special Needs Assistants in Zumba classes. Given that many students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, the school focuses on fostering connections with families to better support student learning. The principal acknowledged the challenges:

We'd have to do a body of work getting even [low socioeconomic status] parents to come in through the school door here because they'd have that negative association with the school and wouldn't have probably finished school. So, you know, and that's, we're lucky to have homeschool liaison. And our mantra here is the more times you're in school, the better it is for your son and daughter. (Principal)

The school emphasizes preemptive support measures to avoid difficult meetings with parents later on. As the Principal stated, 'Our thing is we want to put the supports in before we get to a stage where there're very difficult meetings with parents'.

The innovative, school-based activities and practices outlined above in both schools appear to have positively influenced support structures within the school, strengthened relationships with the wider school community, and ultimately enhanced student learning experiences.

### **Leadership excellence: guiding success in schools**

No program or intervention can be effectively implemented within a school setting without the endorsement of the school's leadership, as well as the support and commitment of teachers and parents (Sancho et al., 2024). The success of these initiatives stemmed from a shared vision within the school



community, where everyone clearly understood and committed to their collective goals. Effective principals co-create this vision with the community integrate core values, emphasize student learning, foster leadership, and guide collaborative discussions to address complex challenges (Lambert, 2002). As Hallinger and Heck (2002) suggest, 'When a personal vision is shared by others, it can become a catalyst for transformation' (p. 10). The DEIS Plans (school improvement plan), in both schools, were developed following the guidelines provided by the Department of Education, involving the entire school community in the process, and were prominently displayed in both schools as a constant reminder of their collective objectives.

### ***Case study 1: benevolent leadership***

The most significant feature of this school is its benevolent leadership, which, as Cheng et al. (2004) describe, provides personalized, holistic, and enduring care to everyone under its guidance. The leadership acknowledges and respects the cultural differences of the students and implements strategies consistent with these characteristics (Walker, 2004). Karakas and Sarigollu (2012) highlight, the virtuous cycle of benevolent leadership begins with formal leaders—principals, assistant principals, and teachers—who act as leaders of learning. This cycle then extends its benefits to students, parents, and families, fostering a holistic environment that supports growth and development.

The principal emphasized the school's ethos of empathy and understanding, stating, 'We try to walk in the shoes of the parents and see through the eyes of the child. We do not always succeed. Parental experience and expectations of education may and often differ from those of most educators .... But show me a parent who does not want the best for their child ... a school must see this, respect this, understand this, and let such insight inform its relationships and approach if it is to carry out its role'.

We're an equality-based school and the focus is on access and inclusion for all, irrespective of the child or the pupils' gender, irrespective of their ethnicity, irrespective of their ability. So our mantra would be that we take the pupils from where they're at and our objective is to get them to be the best that they can be in whatever form that will take.

Acknowledging their imperfections and the numerous challenges they face, the leadership takes pride in the dedication and hard work of their staff, drawing inspiration from their commitment. Teachers at the school appreciate the diversity among students and recognize the value of students' home languages in learning the language of instruction. They leverage the flexibility of the primary curriculum to incorporate linguistic diversity positively, viewing students' home languages as assets rather than deficits.

The school leaders have created an overall physical and social environment that appears warm and welcoming, with students' work prominently displayed in both corridors and classrooms. The children seemed at ease when approaching their teachers for assistance, reflecting a supportive and approachable atmosphere. In addition, the staff room maintained a friendly ambience, where interactions among colleagues were open yet professional.

### ***Case study 2: proactive leadership***

School leaders firmly believed in every student's potential to succeed and consistently expressed and implemented these values through various strategies. They were confident in their ability to positively impact the school while remaining aware of the contextual limitations. Walker (2004) describes such leaders as transformers. The leadership team, particularly the principal and a dedicated guidance counselor, maintains strong community and business connections, which enhances the guidance department's efforts. They recognize the crucial role of guidance and counseling, especially for disadvantaged students.

To ensure a smooth transition from feeder primary schools, the school reaches out during a less crowded period. The principal described the early induction:

We visit the primary school to identify poor attenders. Then we invite sixth-class students in during August for a two-week program, one week per group. We focus on vulnerable students, helping them get familiar

with the school through activities like home economics, literacy, and numeracy. They meet us and explore the school in a calm setting, with only 30 or 40 people around. (Principal)

Further, to build ties with primary schools, second-year students are sent to run short, engaging foreign language classes.

The leaders take a proactive approach to prevent issues, ensuring that no student is overlooked or given inadequate support. Through collaboration among various leadership tiers and stakeholders—including the Student Support Team, AEN support, Guidance, year heads, classroom teachers, and parents—clear communication channels ensure all student needs are met. This teamwork allows for a comprehensive response, ensuring timely and appropriate interventions for each student.

The Brilliant Pathway program has encouraged students to start thinking about their future careers early on.

We start pathways to college in the first year, getting students to think about colleges, PLCs, or apprenticeships, unlike our own experience where this didn't happen until fifth or sixth year. (Principal)

Additionally, guidance counselors focus not only on raising students' aspirations but also on ensuring they make the right decisions. As one counselor explained, 'We've shifted toward making sure everyone makes the right decision for themselves, whether it's apprenticeship, work, or something else' (Guidance Counselor).

## Discussion and conclusion

The study's findings highlight the pivotal role of school leaders in fostering an active school culture, as defined by Smyth and Hattam (2002). In both case study schools, principals established a clear strategic direction and nurtured a positive environment characterized by a proactive mindset and strong staff motivation—key factors for driving improvement and achieving success, especially in challenging contexts (Day et al., 2020). They were instrumental in implementing various interventions and programs that boosted student engagement, achievement, retention, and progression to higher education. The high rates of attendance and progression demonstrate the effectiveness of their leadership in cultivating this active school culture.

Under their dynamic leadership, the schools actively identify and implement research-informed interventions, whether as part of national initiatives or tailored, need-based school programs. For example, national initiatives such as Reading and Mathematics Recovery or JCSP have strong theoretical foundations, but it is through diligent implementation that they truly enrich students' learning experiences. This effective practice is evident in the case studies. Similarly, transition points between educational levels are especially critical for students at risk of early school leaving (Grimaldi & Landri, 2019). While poorly managed transitions can increase dropout rates, the case studies highlight effective support systems, such as early induction for sixth-class students and comprehensive information about secondary education. Initiatives like TAP and CFES further promote equity by fostering the belief that higher education is attainable for all, regardless of background. According to Iacobescu (2025), successful transition programs improve student attendance, academic achievement, and retention. Building positive relationships among stakeholders—schools, students, and parents—is crucial to creating a supportive community and addressing the challenges associated with transitions (Bagnall et al., 2024; Iacobescu, 2025; van Rens et al., 2018). Both schools ensure that students and parents are well-informed and provide them with all the necessary information to ease transitions. Grimaldi and Landri (2019) highlight the transition between lower and upper secondary education as the most critical in preventing early school leaving. In case study two, this is addressed by offering a successful TY program tailored to the needs and aspirations of both students and parents, providing a wide range of learning experiences to enhance student engagement. As noted by Iacobescu (2025), effective transition programs are distinguished by activities that address the diverse needs of students. Teachers play a crucial role in this process by adapting content to align with students' individual needs and interests, actively involving them in the instructional and educational process, and encouraging their participation in a wide range of extracurricular activities.

In addition to the TY, both schools involve students in a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Research indicates that students participating in extracurricular activities tend to have more

positive perceptions of social-emotional security, adult and peer support, and a sense of connectedness to school. Such involvement fosters growth in academic achievement, attendance, social skills, leadership abilities, and a forward-looking mindset (Shaffer, 2019). Therefore, maintaining extracurricular programs is essential for schools. Various initiatives, such as the Flag programs, school choir collaborations with senior care homes, and the Uganda program, have been implemented to strengthen students' sense of belonging to the school and to foster relationships between teachers and students, as well as among peers.

In both case studies, the importance of parental involvement in the educational process was evident across all school activities and programs. A continuous effort has been made to strengthen relationships with parents, with the roles of HSCL coordinators and principals proving vital in this regard. Principals from both schools frequently emphasized the necessity of building trust and assuring parents of the support available for their children. When parents trust the school and are confident that their children will receive support when needed, they are more likely to ensure regular school attendance, reducing absenteeism as a concern. Supporting this, Capretta et al. (2024) and Kaplan Toren (2025) suggest that by fostering strong parent-teacher relationships built on trust, schools can potentially create a positive learning environment that supports student well-being and academic success. In line with these findings, the high achievement and attendance rates at these schools can also be attributed to the strong trust established between parents and the school. This relationship aligns with Bronfenbrenner's theory, which emphasizes the importance of close and meaningful interactions within the microsystem for fostering positive educational outcomes. Programs such as Roots of Empathy, Nurture Room, after-school activities, SST, JCSP, and the TY program all exemplify parental trust and involvement in the school's work.

A critical aspect to consider in both case studies—whether they focus on national initiatives or school-based programs—is the significant increase in constructive interactions within the microsystems of the schools, as described by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. These interactions, whether stemming from transition efforts, co-curricular activities, or extracurricular programs, facilitate enhanced opportunities for student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and parent-to-teacher engagement, all of which positively contribute to students' holistic development. Furthermore, programs such as the Uganda Immersion Program (as seen in Case Study 2) and various Flag programs (Case Study 1) extend these interactions beyond the school, fostering the creation of a mesosystem in which schools collaborate with external agencies to enrich students' learning experiences. Additionally, the schools' partnerships with the local community introduce the exosystem, exemplified by initiatives like the 'Friendly Voices Choir' and Art Club, which have a positive impact on students. The educational and economic policies applied to the schools, such as the DEIS designation, further illustrate the influence of macrosystems in shaping the lives of children and young people. Over time, the positive interactions across the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems have significantly influenced the chronosystem, as evidenced by high transition, retention, and completion rates in the case study schools.

This study holds important practical implications for principals, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers. The findings emphasize the significance of implementing a comprehensive range of interventions and programs by involving all levels of school staff, parents, and students. A key takeaway is the fundamental role of school leaders in fostering distributed leadership and promoting collaboration with community services and external agencies, ensuring that students receive tailored support based on their individual needs. The study further highlights the importance of system leadership, which unifies the collective human capital within the school and views the institution as an interconnected system. Although the term 'system leadership' was not explicitly mentioned during the interviews, the researchers observed that the practices in these schools reflected elements of instructional and distributed leadership, with a strong emphasis on parental partnerships and a school-wide commitment from teachers.

However, the study has certain limitations. As a cross-sectional analysis, it captures the cumulative impact of various national and school-based initiatives but does not isolate the effects of individual programs. Future research could address this by conducting longitudinal studies that focus on the long-term impact of specific interventions. Additionally, comparative studies examining multiple programs or initiatives would provide a more nuanced understanding of the relative effectiveness of different approaches. These future directions could offer deeper insights for refining educational strategies and interventions aimed at improving student outcomes.

## Notes

1. The name comes from two Irish words Tús, meaning a new beginning and Lá the Irish for day ... a new day for children. <https://www.cistudio.ie/work/tusla>.
2. Secondary school catering for age group 12 – 18.
3. Every H1 grade equals 100 points, and if the grade is obtained at a Higher level, a further 25 points are added to the overall points.
4. Dublin City University.
5. Attendance, Retention, Literacy, Numeracy, Supporting Educational Transitions, Partnership with parents and others, Leadership, Wellbeing, and Continuous Professional development.
6. <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/>.
7. <https://pdst.ie/primary/literacy/reading-recovery>.
8. <https://www.mata.ie/>.
9. [https://ncca.ie/media/2496/the\\_revised\\_jcsp\\_program\\_statement\\_.pdf](https://ncca.ie/media/2496/the_revised_jcsp_program_statement_.pdf).
10. School Support Team comprises the school leadership team and the guidance and counseling Team.
11. <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/be7c149f-7c67-4866-8f88-6420ff4d67a3/Revised-LCAPS.pdf>.
12. <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Senior-Cycle/LCA/>.
13. <https://whatworks.gov.ie/hub-search/report/75/Nurture%20Groups#:~:text=Children%20typically%20attend%20Nurture%20Groups,curriculum%20tasks%2C%20and%20nurture%20breakfast>.
14. <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/work-in-schools/roots-of-empathy/>.

## Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Dublin City University, with ethics approval reference DCUREC/2024/004.

## Author contribution statement

**Sarah Gardezi:** Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; formal analysis; visualization. data curation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; project administration.

**Aideen Cassidy:** Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; formal analysis, data curation; writing – review and editing; Project administration; validation. **Gerry McNamara:** Funding acquisition; Project administration, Supervision; methodology; investigation; formal analysis; writing – review and editing; conceptualization. **Martin Brown:** Funding acquisition; Project administration, resources; Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; data curation; writing – review and editing. **Joe O'Hara:** Funding acquisition; Project administration; Resources; Conceptualization; supervision; writing – review and editing; validation.

All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [SG]. The data are not publicly available due to [restrictions e.g. their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants].

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