



**The Irish Foster Care Association
Submission to
The Department of Education & Youth
on The National Conversation on Education**

28th February 2026



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About the Irish Foster Care Association:

The Irish Foster Care Association is the national organisation that supports foster families and the wider fostering community. IFCA promotes and strengthens foster care through the provision of a range of supports and by advocating at a national level for the progressive reform of policy and practice.

On a daily basis we hear from foster carers and fostering practitioners about the challenges for children in care of engaging in education. Our submission focuses on what currently works well in education for children in care, recommendations around the issues that need addressing and the kind of education system we hope to see that is truly inclusive of children in care, their parents and carers.

What is currently working well for children in care in education:

Children in alternative care can benefit from the structure that the school environment offers and the key relationships that can be formed, ie, a teacher or SNA consistently in their lives who helps to promote their sense of safety, identity, belonging and competency.

The focus on improving social, emotional and physical education is welcome as their experiences can compromise their capacity to build relationships and can impact on how they manage their own bodies, regulate their emotions and are 'available' for learning.

Recommendations to address issues that currently exist:

1. Best start:

Many children in care have experienced difficult early starts in their lives. As the first 5 years are crucial for their long-term wellbeing and development, greater supports to enable them to get a better start in education are essential. There are ring-fenced places in community early years settings for children identified by Tusla. Safeguarding and access their places can be a challenge when children move placements.

Recommendation: Ensure access to early years education for children in care. Greater flexibility is needed in ECCE for children in care.

Recommendation: Allow a third ECCE year where previous years have been disrupted, or it is identified in a child's Care Plan as beneficial for the child. A more robust response to the needs of children with additional needs in early years settings is needed.

Recommendation: Provision of AIMS workers where necessary for the child, even mid-year. Provision of an early wrap-around service available for children where needed.

Recommendation: Provision of a curriculum that actively promotes school readiness through promotion of sensorimotor development and bodily regulation, e.g. the BUSS Model¹. See ‘Building Underdeveloped Sensorimotor Systems to Support Children’s Bodily and Emotional Regulation to Enable them to Better Participate in Relationships and Learning at School’ – IFCA’s Submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2024²

2. Assessment of Needs and Allocation of Resources:

There are long waiting lists for Assessment of Need.³ Early, comprehensive assessment is essential for children in care to receive appropriate school placements and supports. As it stands, they are slow to receive assessments and the specific supports needed to participate fully in school.

Recommendation: Provision of timely educational needs assessments for all children in care. Without necessary supports, a pattern of difficulties is established which compromises the child’s sense of safety and belonging and which challenge school resources. Arrangements may be made in response which can be fundamentally harmful and contrary to the rights of the child, e.g. a reduced hours timetable over prolonged periods. There is increased risk of school refusal, absenteeism or expulsion. In 2022/2023 more children in care were absent from school for 20 or more days (17%) compared with all children (15%)⁴.

Recommendation: National review of the practice of absenteeism, reduced school hours and expulsions for children in care. Practice guidance in this regard to take account of the impact on the child. Ensure regulations around the reduced school day are strictly implemented.

A higher proportion of children in care in 2022/23 were in a special school or a special class in mainstream primary school (14%) compared with all children (3%)⁵. Children with ASD and other disabilities may be placed in a special class in a mainstream school. While this policy of mainstream provision has value, special classes are often confined to a single unit, resulting in reduced expertise and inadequate resourcing e.g. lack of a walking principal.

Recommendation: Review of the provision of special classes within mainstream settings to ensure adequate resourcing, development of necessary expertise and the establishment of a robust and lasting peer community for children with special needs.

Children in care have wide range of additional needs as a result of experiencing developmental trauma. These include sensorimotor, specific learning and speech and language difficulties, difficulties with executive functioning, difficulties with bodily and emotional regulation. All can impact upon a child’s sense of self-worth and belonging and can be misunderstood by school

¹ www.bussmodel.org

² <https://ifca.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/NCCA-BUSS-Model-submission.pdf>

³ www.gov.ie

⁴ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/FP/FP-EEACC/educationalattendanceattainmentandotheroutcomesofchildrenincare2018-2025/schoolattainmentofchildrenincareandallchildren2018-2025/>

⁵ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/FP/FP-EEACC/educationalattendanceattainmentandotheroutcomesofchildrenincare2018-2025/schoolattainmentofchildrenincareandallchildren2018-2025/>

staff and other children. Without appropriate supports, e.g. Special Needs Assistant, resource teaching hours, mental health supports, access to a resource/quiet space or sensory room, these children cannot reach their educational potential with the consequent life-long impacts of poor school attainment. Children in care are often not allocated additional supports because they are waiting for assessments, do not have a formal, qualifying diagnosis or the school does not have the resources. Current criteria for allocation of these resources does not take account of the impact of developmental trauma and what that looks like in the school context.

Recommendation: The assessment and allocation of additional supports and resources in schools to be inclusive of, and responsive to, the specific needs of children who have experienced developmental trauma.

There can be challenges when children move school placement during the year in relation to SNA access and learning support as many of these in-school decisions are made at the start of the school year. It also can place them further down the list for NEPS interventions if children move schools.

Recommendation: Enable schools to apply for extra resources mid-year because of new mid-year enrolments and ensure that children can continue to access assessments in a timely way despite changes of placements.

Recommendation: The application of Individual Education Plans for children in care to ensure their emotional, relationship and learning needs are planned for and reviewed in collaboration with their carers and relevant Tusla staff.

Recommendation: The implementation of a wrap-around suite of supports for children in care in education as informed by young people in care in the Take Care Toolkit (EPIC)⁶.

3. Managing transitions for children in care:

Children in care are particularly impacted by transitions, e.g. from primary to secondary but also within the school day, i.e. between home and school, teachers and classrooms. Our schools need to be sensitive to these transitions for the child (Anderson et al ⁷).

Recommendation: Recognition within the school staff of the impact of transitions on children in care.

Children may not be in their permanent care placement. They are more likely to experience changes of school. Enrolment can be a challenge for children coming into care. There may be difficulties securing a place for a child locally. Children in care need to be prioritised for places in their local schools where that school is deemed appropriate for their needs. This will reduce the stress of long school commutes and enable the possibility of friendships with their peers outside of school.

Recommendation: Priority to be given to children in care for appropriate, local school placements.

⁶ <https://www.epiconline.ie/take-care-toolkit/>

⁷ [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355\(00\)00020-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355(00)00020-3)

4. Communication with key people in the child's life:

Children may be the subject of a voluntary care agreement, care order or a kinship care arrangement. This can impact on the nature of the information about the child that is shared with and by the school. Clarity regarding what information is to be shared and consent issues is needed from the outset of each school year. Regular, positive communication between schools and foster carers is essential so they can be active participants and promoters of the children's education.

Recommendation: A partnership approach to communication, collaboration and information-sharing between schools, parents, carers and social workers.

Recommendation: Foster carers be given a statutory voice with regard to education for the children in their care.

Recommendation: Recognition of the unique needs and circumstances of children in care and challenges faced by their carers in supporting them in education by ensuring that all children in care receive the Back to School Allowance.

5. Creating a Supportive School Environment for Children in Care:

Schools need to be ready to meet the needs of children in care by taking a trauma-informed, relationship-based approach to provision. For example, the 'Nurture School' approach provides much of what children in care need in school. This approach is successfully in action in schools such as St. Finian's National School in Finglas⁸ where positive outcomes for children, school staff and parents/carers are being seen (Unlocking Potential: Supporting Children in Care and their Carers in Education, IFCA webinar on 17/09/2025)⁹.

Recommendation: Implementation of a trauma-informed, relationship-based approach to education provision.

Recommendation: Provision of education programmes for education staff to ensure they are trauma-aware and understand how trauma can impact on presentation, behaviour and attainment in children and what approaches yield the best results for children with a trauma background such as children in care.

Recommendation: Understanding that there may be times that children in care may not be able to take on additional school activities like homework in the evenings, e.g. where family contact visits are taking place.

Recommendation: Building relationships by school staff with children in care and their carers, aimed at school retention, particularly at second level.

⁸ www.saintfinians.ie

⁹ <https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/mYFPCs9XcZXmtrriaHh6ZWcpho6Mhj1oks40FY8xCngWSxESrYVNFphac4jIF7oU.4e6P-ljv7iMKUirL>

6. Beyond Second Level Education:

Young people leaving the care system face a myriad of challenges, leaving them very vulnerable to not accessing ongoing education or training or to early drop-out from further education.

Recommendation: A review of the Aftercare system to allow access to education when the young people are ready to participate, not only when they are 18 or 19 years of age.

Recommendation: Adequate resourcing of Access centres/teams in further education settings that are trauma-informed and can understand and support the social, mental health and learning needs of care-experienced young students.

With thanks to the Department of Education for the opportunity to take part in the National Conversation on Education and to the children and young people, foster carers and practitioners who have informed this submission.