

Press Release

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**An Roinn Leanaí, Míchumais
agus Comhionannais**
Department of Children,
Disability and Equality

OECD survey highlights strong commitment among Ireland's early learning and care workforce

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley, T.D, today welcomed new findings from the OECD TALIS Starting Strong 2024 survey, which provides a comprehensive picture of Ireland's early learning and care (ELC) workforce, alongside other OECD jurisdictions.

The survey collected data from early years educators and managers in centre-based early learning and care settings in Ireland, serving children from birth up to school age.

The results show that Ireland's early learning and care workforce is deeply committed to child-centred early learning and care with a strong emphasis on inclusive practice and supporting children's socio-emotional development.

Ireland's early learning and care workforce demonstrate child-centred professional values

The OECD survey shows that early years educators in Ireland report warm relationships with children, and a strong focus on play, inclusion and holistic learning – all core commitments within Ireland's Aistear and Síolta frameworks.

Staff feel prepared for their roles through their initial education, with higher proportions of staff in Ireland having completed training specifically to work with children, compared to many other OECD jurisdictions. In Ireland, over 90% of staff reported that their initial training to work with children included practical training, Ireland, alongside Spain and Türkiye, had the lowest share of staff (2%) whose training did not include a practical component. Staff in Ireland also reported the most consistent use of practices to promote awareness and acceptance of diversity among children.

Compared to other OECD jurisdictions that participated, staff in Ireland were more likely to have recently received training on working with children with special education needs. Over 60% of staff in Ireland covered working with children with special education needs in their

recent training activities. They were also less likely to report accommodating children's special education needs as a source of stress. Ireland was the only pre-primary system across the participating jurisdictions where less than 40% of staff reported that accommodating children with additional education needs was a source of work-related stress.

Welcoming the launch of the findings, Minister Foley said:

"I am pleased to see the findings which showcase the quality of Ireland's early learning and care workforce. I want to thank the staff for the excellence and dedication they provide for children in early learning and care every single day. They are implementing child-centred and play-based inclusive practice to give every child the best start in life."

Workforce challenges remain

The findings also highlight persistent challenges, including pressures around recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Educators and managers cited pressures related to workload, pay, career progression and work-based stress.

In addition, while participation in training in Ireland is comparatively strong, barriers to taking part in professional development were identified by staff. The most frequently reported barriers by staff in Ireland were time (61%), insufficient staff to fill in for their absence (67%) and expense (65%).

These challenges were evident in all participating OECD jurisdictions.

Addressing the Challenges

The Government recognises early years educators as vital to delivering quality early learning and care and is actively addressing recruitment and retention challenges.

While the Government is not the direct employer, it funds the sector and supports wage improvements through Core Funding. Core Funding supports services with the costs of independently negotiated Employment Regulation Orders by the Early Years services Joint Labour Committee process. Three rounds of Employment Regulations have been agreed since the introduction of Core Funding, the most recent, which commenced on 13 October, resulted in a 10% average increase in minimum hourly rates of pay. It is estimated that 67% of those working in the sector will see their wages increase as a result of the new minimum pay rates

Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-age Childcare, is Ireland's long-term plan for developing a high-quality, valued, and professionally recognised

workforce, which will be achieved through measures such as graduate leadership requirements, strengthened CPD systems and professional recognition initiatives.

The insights from TALIS Starting Strong will directly inform the implementation of Nurturing Skills, helping to create a more stable, skilled, and professionally recognised workforce with expanded career pathways, that delivers the highest quality early learning experiences for children in Ireland.

Minister Foley noted that:

“While many of the findings are positive, they also shine a light on long-standing challenges around recruitment, retention, workload and professional status, challenges that are shared across most participating jurisdictions. I am committed to supporting this workforce and will ensure that the findings are used to inform the ongoing implementation of Nurturing Skills.

Nurturing Skills provides a roadmap to support and strengthen the workforce – enhancing access to high-quality professional development, supporting career progression, and ensuring that staff are valued and recognised for the vital role they play.”

Notes

1. View the launch of the findings *Strengthening early childhood education and care: Results from TALIS Starting Strong* which will be made available after the launch event at <https://www.youtube.com/@EduSkillsOECD/videos>

2. The full report and country notes can be viewed at <https://doi.org/10.1787/20af08c0-en>

3. TALIS is the world’s largest international survey about teachers and school leaders which has been running since 2008. A strand of the survey focusing on early years educators and leaders was launched in 2018, called TALIS Starting Strong. The survey involves a representative sample of early years educators across a number of OECD jurisdictions and runs on a 6-year cycle. 2024 is the second cycle of TALIS Starting Strong.

4. This international survey was coordinated in Ireland by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), which acts as the National Project Office for the survey. The CSO oversaw the implementation of the OECD sampling, data collection and quality assurance procedures in Ireland. A Frontier Series Output ‘*Early Learning and Care Settings (OECD TALIS 2024)*’, published today by the CSO (<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/FP/FP-ELCS/earlylearningandcaresettingsoecdalis2024/>) summarises the findings from the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) Starting Strong 2024 for Ireland. The CSO note that due to considerations around sample size and response rates, care must be taken when interpreting and reporting the statistics in this release. As this is the first iteration of this survey in Ireland, the data in this Frontier release represents a new baseline for an emerging evidence base in the ELC sector.

5. Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028 was published by the Government of Ireland in late 2021. Nurturing Skills aims to strengthen the ongoing process of professionalisation for those working in early learning and care and school-age childcare. Further information can be found at www.nurturingskills.ie