



Submission to the Early Years Service Joint Labour Committee  
in response to its proposals for the minimum remuneration and  
working conditions of the Early Years and School Age Care  
workforce

January 2024

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Early Childhood Ireland is pleased to have the opportunity to make the following observations on the [Proposed Minimum Rates of Pay for an Employment Regulation Order](#) as formulated by the Early Years' Service Joint Labour Committee.

## **Early Childhood Ireland**

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading children's advocacy and membership organisation, working in partnership with 4,000 members nationwide to achieve quality experiences for every child in Early Years and School Age Care settings. Early Childhood Ireland advocates for an effective Early Years and School Age Care system which values, supports, and invests in childhood, children, and services.

## **The importance of Early Years and School Age Care**

There is a large body of evidence which demonstrates that early childhood is one of the most vital periods in children's learning and development. High-quality Early Years and School Age Care provides long-lasting benefits for children, their families, and communities. Research shows that the provision of high-quality early years education and care is beneficial for children living in poverty or who experience disadvantage.

Ireland recognises that Early Years (EY) and School Age Care (SAC) is a public good. It acknowledges the [Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems \(2019/C 189/02\)](#), which states that all children have a right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality, and it has obligations under the [European Child Guarantee](#), which aims to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing the access of children in need to a set of key services, including early childhood education and care.

The importance of our Early Years and School Age Care system has been recognised by the Government through the implementation of recent policies such as [First 5](#), [Nurturing Skills](#), and [Partnership for the Public Good](#), all of which have an overarching goal of improving early childhood for children living in Ireland.

## **The value and status of the Early Years and School Age Care workforce**

Early Childhood Ireland is concerned about the future direction for the 30,000 qualified Early Years and School Age Care staff in our sector who deliver quality for children in settings every day.

The rates of pay in the proposed ERO do not reflect the value of the work or the level of training and education that educators have obtained in Early Years and School Age Care.

Working in Early Years and School Age Care settings requires high-level knowledge and core skills such as the ability to relate well with children, understanding child development and being adept at delivering education and care that meets the individual needs of a child.

Latest available data from the Pobal Early Years Sector Profile shows that approximately 25% of staff working directly with children have an NFQ level 5 qualification, 40% have a Level 6, while 33% have an NFQ Level 7 or higher<sup>1</sup>.

Early Years and School Age Care providers, educators and practitioners are accountable for their work to key stakeholders including parents/guardians, Tusla, Pobal, the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

### **Rates of pay**

The issues which Early Childhood Ireland members highlight most are about staffing. 56% of services in Ireland experienced recruitment challenges in the year leading up to mid-2023<sup>1</sup>. Staffing pressures are not caused by insufficient numbers of Early Years and School Age Care educators, (currently, there are 63 relevant courses being offered across the country<sup>2</sup>), with many graduates per year. The main impediment to effective staff recruitment and retention is low pay and other working conditions.

While government policy, rightly, strives for a graduate-led workforce with quality-assured continuous professional development, educators and practitioners are not seeing pay rates that match their qualifications.

Please see the table below for the difference between the proposed ERO rate and the current National Minimum Wage (NMW) rate of €12.70 (effective from January 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> [European Commission Policy Brief](#) – Staff shortages in early childhood education and care (ECEC), November 2023

<sup>2</sup> [Parliamentary Question No.715, Dáil Éireann, 3 October, 2023](#)

A fully trained Early Years educator’s rate of pay will start at €0.95 above the NMW. This rate of pay is not reflective of the value of the work being undertaken by Early Years educators and School Age Care practitioners.

	<b>Proposed ERO Rate</b>	<b>Difference between the proposed ERO rate and the NMW for people aged 20 and above @€12.70 (Jan 2024)</b>
Early Years Educators SAC practitioners	€13.65 per hour	95c
Lead Educators SAC coordinators	€14.70	€2
Graduate Lead Educators (Room Leaders) Graduate SAC Coordinators	€16.28	€3.58
Deputy/Assistant Manager	€16.49	€3.79
Centre Manager	€17.33	€4.63
Graduate Centre Manager	€18.11	€5.41

### **3-year experience requirement for graduate premium**

Children in Early Years and School Age Care settings deserve education and care of the highest quality, and while the EY and SAC workforce becomes increasingly professionalised in response to those expectations, efforts must be made to reward this professionalisation.

To attract and retain a graduate workforce, pay and conditions must reflect the value of this essential workforce, including the removal of the three-year experience requirement.

The removal of the three-year requirement to avail of the graduate premium in Core Funding was intended to “put lead educators in a comparable position to other professional graduate roles in other sectors” and to further support the recruitment and retention in the sector of recent graduates. (*Annual Monitoring Report on the Implementation of Nurturing Skills, 2022*)

The removal of this requirement was announced as part of Budget 2023 when Minister O’Gorman announced his intention to remove it, subject to a recommendation from the Joint Labour Committee. This measure was broadly welcomed by the sector. Early Childhood Ireland heard only the most positive welcome for this announcement from our diverse, nationwide membership.

The failure of the Joint Labour Committee to agree on the removal of the of the 3-year experience requirement is discouraging for Early Years graduates and sends the wrong message about the value of their educational attainment and of their standing as qualified educators.

The retention of the three-year experience requirement is at odds with the 'First 5' Government policy of achieving a graduate-led workforce in the EY and SAC sector by 2028, and it does not align with 'Nurturing Skills', which sets out plans to raise qualification levels, to create professional development pathways, to promote careers in the sector, and to continue moving towards regulation of the profession.

Graduates in Early Years education are competent professionals, providing high quality care and education to children aged from Birth-6 years. Early Years education includes child psychology, child health, play, language and literacy, child care and protection, arts and the early years, and the Aistear curriculum framework. Early Years graduates have an understanding of the young child's development and how best to plan and implement programmes that suit the individual needs of the child.

### **The Employment Regulation Order process**

While having a forum to negotiate the terms and conditions for Early Years and School Age Care workers is welcome, and long overdue, the sector now finds itself in a situation where it is at the mercy of two annual processes, the Joint Labour Committee's deliberations, and the Budget. To provide certainty to both employers and staff, Early Childhood Ireland has separately called for a 5-year plan for the sector, and an increase in Graduate Premiums to further incentivise the recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff. While we realise that these issues fall outside the remit of the Committee, we urge that it is convened on a timely basis annually, and that its members are mindful of the reality of a high number of Early Years and School Age Care settings which operate from late August to June each year. Any delays to the annual negotiation process cause uncertainty for providers and staff alike, and ultimately impact on children and their families.

### **Conclusion**

Early Childhood Ireland believes that despite the expertise of the members of the Joint Labour Committee, the proposed rates of pay are too low and do not reflect the value of the vital contribution made by the Early Years and School Age Care workforce. We believe that

this damages the image and standing of the sector, as well as keeping a significant number of a largely female workforce in near-poverty wages. Given that the government is providing the funding to pay the agreed wage levels, Early Childhood Ireland is perplexed as to why the proposed hourly rates are barely above the National Minimum Wage. Ireland needs to provide a world-class system of Early Years and School Age Care provision, which is in the best interests of children and should be the shared goal of all stakeholders. A properly recognised and fully valued professional workforce is an essential element of such a system and low pay will not achieve this.

Further, we are astonished that a universally welcomed proposal from the Department of Children, to remove the 3-year requirement for graduates, was rejected by the Joint Labour Committee. This has long been a source of deep unhappiness among practitioners, academics and policy makers. At no cost to employers, this potential change signalled a deserved level of equity with primary school teachers and an important boost to educators. There is significant information available that Early Years graduates often divert to other career/further education options, and it is Early Childhood Ireland's strong contention that the removal of this out-dated rule would have impacted positively on their decision-making. We urge the Committee to reconsider its position about removing the requirement.