



Iontaobhas Scoileanna Éamainn Rís  
Edmund Rice Schools Trust

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# FUTURES ON HOLD

**Edmund Rice Schools**

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**A Position Paper  
on direct provision and its impact on learning  
and wellbeing for students and young people.**

June 2019

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“

I would love a home. I want to go to college. I want to know I can stay in Ireland. I have lived with my family in direct provision for six years. That is too long. If I could change just one thing it is that direct provision ends.”

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**Edmund Rice School secondary student**

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Living in direct provision can be very restrictive. There is a severe lack of amenities and for that reason life can be very monotonous. You feel like you are living in an institution. People in the centre are often afraid to interact with each other and, to be honest, there is an element of paranoia. Life in the centre can be intrusive as there are CCTV cameras everywhere, security staff monitor the grounds and it often feels like you are being monitored 24/7.”

Student, Dublin



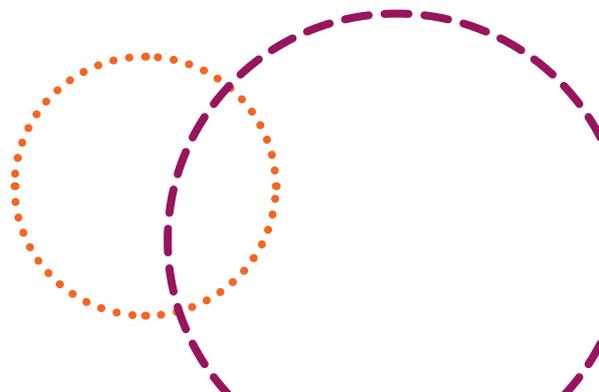
# FUTURES ON HOLD

## **Our position on direct provision**

Nineteen years have passed since the introduction of the direct provision system in Ireland. Next year, will mark its 20th anniversary.

The only right thing to do to mark this anniversary year, we believe, is to reform direct provision as it is currently operating, and to put in its place a system of welcome that is compassionate, respectful, caring, fair and short-term.

This position paper will be used by our 96 schools in the coming school year as the basis for classroom discussion, understanding and advocacy projects aimed at raising awareness about the direct provision system as it currently operates and the reforms that can be made to help improve the lives of people who come to Ireland hoping for sanctuary and support.



# 10

## Things Edmund Rice Schools Will Advocate On To Improve Life for Students and Young Asylum Seekers in Direct Provision

### Reform the current model of direct provision

#### 1 Reform Direct Provision

Edmund Rice Schools call for a reform of the Direct Provision system as a means of accommodating asylum seekers, and particularly families and young people attending school.

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#### 2 Six Months Maximum

The current system should be replaced by an interim measure where no person, and particularly children and young people, can end up in the direct provision system for longer than six months.

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#### 3 Pastoral Care Not Profit

The model of private enterprise benefitting from providing accommodation for asylum seekers should be replaced by a not-for-profit model with a focus on pastoral care and support.

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### Respect human dignity

#### 4 Respect Family Life and Privacy

All interim accommodation centres should provide basic privacy for families to allow children and young people to thrive within their family units. Unaccompanied minors who reach adulthood while still in school should not share accommodation with much older adults.

#### 5 End Arbitrary Movement of Families and Young People

Families and young people should not be moved from centre to centre arbitrarily, sometimes against their will. Students in direct provision face multiple challenges without the additional challenge of having to move to new locations and new schools, particularly when they may wish to remain where they have made connections.

### Support young people's education and well-being

#### 6 Equal Access to Third Level

Edmund Rice Schools welcome the recent announcement by the Department of Education and Skills that the eligibility criteria for asylum seeker students who want to go on to third level education will be lowered, from five years to three in the education system.

While this is an improvement, it should be kept under continuous review to ensure that there are no barriers to students who have completed the leaving certificate and who have achieved the necessary points for a third level course of their choice.

## **7** End the Blunt Categorisation of Students as Adults

At the moment, the day a student turns 18, he or she is considered an adult. For students in direct provision, and particularly unaccompanied minors within the asylum system, this often means that they have to move away from host families, or to a new direct provision centre, not as a minor, but as an adult. This blunt re-categorisation occurs when students are in their senior cycle, often in their final year before they sit their leaving certificate. It adds unnecessary stress at an already stressful period of their lives, and is often a key reason for students not completing the state exam.

## **8** Study Areas and Food – Basics Must be in Place

Accommodation centres should have adequate services and supports for children and young people attending school. This includes the provision of designated, quiet and supervised areas for homework and study. Children and young people should also be allowed more flexibility with the food they want and the times they want to eat. Students studying hard for exams tell us that they often can't get anything to eat after 5pm.

## **9** Additional Resources and Supports to Schools

The Department of Education and Skills should provide additional resources and supports to schools working with children and young people living in direct provision. Schools need additional financial resources to help students with books, uniforms and to ensure that they can benefit from the full school experience, including Transition Year and extracurricular activities. They also need dedicated and qualified psychological support for direct provision students, many of whom have experienced atrocities and are living with the impact of trauma.

## **10** Wraparound Team for Students

There should be designated, wraparound support teams assigned to work with students in direct provision centres, to ensure that students can attend school and are provided with the logistical, language and mental health supports they require to thrive. This specialist team could include, for example, an Education Welfare Officer, a Home School Community Liaison officer and a member of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

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## It feels like a prison

I came here from Afghanistan with a smuggler. My uncle paid. It was very expensive, a terrible journey. But direct provision is like a prison to me.

The system we go through makes me feel so hopeless. You are not allowed to cook for yourself. We are like prisoners. I don't understand this government, bringing in multinational companies, charging low taxes, and bringing us in and treating us like this.

I don't know about university. SUSI has its own requirements.

My school here is my favourite place. It treats me so well, like a human. We are young people who are very frustrated. There is a lot of depression in the hostels. There is a lot of loneliness. I should be able to apply for university.”

**Edmund Rice Senior Cycle student**

# ADVOCACY AND CHANGE

## How this position paper came about

This position paper outlines the joint position of 96 Edmund Rice Schools and what we would like to see changed to improve the lives and futures of our students and their families, and the students attending many other schools around the country, who are living in direct provision.

### Three students

It was spurred on because of the brave, honest and heartfelt testimonies of three of our students.

In April 2019, three sixth-year students from CBS Westland Row school in Dublin's city centre, spoke at our Edmund Rice Schools 'Walk in my Shoes' event.

They shared their stories and their experiences of life in direct provision with their peers to build a more understanding school environment for teenagers seeking asylum, particularly those living in direct provision.

As one of the students, who left Syria when he was 15 and travelled alone to Dublin, said:

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It's an important thing to take the experience of one person and spread it to others. It was a really horrible experience and I wish no one else goes through it. But I also want people to understand that bad things happen and we need to help each other.”

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### Students want change

The impact of the young men's stories was phenomenal. Students took these stories back to their own schools and gave a strong indication that they would like to do something as a student body to highlight the difficulties they saw with the direct provision system.

This Position Paper has come about because of our interaction with young people in our schools who are living in direct provision.

Our principals, deputy principals, teachers and students see first-hand the huge challenges that students and their friends face every day.

## Challenges and Trauma

Simply getting to school in the first place can be a struggle. Many find it difficult to study or to finish their homework in environments that are often noisy and over-crowded, or indeed, in some cases, frightening and unsafe.

At a deeper level, many of the students in direct provision who we work with have experienced atrocities, war, and violence. Others have arrived in Ireland, often after long and dangerous passage with smugglers, without their families.

We have students who can only glean whether their mothers, fathers and siblings are alive by scouring Red Cross lists of people in refugee camps on-line. Many are, understandably, deeply traumatised from these experiences. Yet, specialist psychologists or trauma recovery supports are often not available.

## The role of our schools

Our schools work hard to provide the supports they can to students and their families – to ensure that they have uniforms, books, pens, adequate food when they need it, and are supported to be able to join in school activities and trips.

When possible, we provide the basic counselling supports we can. We do everything possible to ensure that students can fulfil their learning potential, not just at primary and secondary school levels, but also in their pursuit of further education, sometimes against statutory odds. With restricted budgets and resources, all supports have to be balanced against the needs of the full student body.

Schools cannot compensate for a direct provision system that isolates young people, that keeps them trapped in poverty, that fails to provide basic rights to privacy and family life and that too often leaves young people feeling lonely, dispirited, without hope and without the chance to pursue their ambitions and futures.

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## **We are heaping misery on misery**

It is incomprehensible that a country like Ireland, with such a distinguished record on caring for others, can preside over the systems of direct provision. It is inhumane and, in my view, is storing up serious problems for the future for the residents and for our country.

We are heaping misery on misery as the students in direct provision have often already witnessed or have been involved in horrific incidences of discrimination, marginalisation and war, and their journeys to Ireland from their homelands are simply awful.”

**Principal**

# SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDMUND RICE SCHOOLS

Edmund Rice Schools are a dynamic, diverse and thriving network of 96 secondary and primary level Catholic schools across Ireland. Over 37,000 children and young people attend our schools.

All of our schools are defined and shaped by our unique Charter. It sets out the values of quality teaching and learning, care, equality, leadership and faith at the heart of Edmund Rice Education.

We encourage our students to be independent thinkers and young social justice leaders by participating in our internationally recognised Edmund Rice advocacy, volunteering and immersion programmes.

## Up to 50 students in direct provision

While the Edmund Rice Schools student population fluctuates slightly every year, we estimate that our schools are now supporting an average of 40–50 students living in direct provision every year.

Over the recent years, we have also seen an increase, as families extend while they wait in direct provision and as people, including young people, continue to arrive

Young people are classified as adults when they reach their 18th birthday. It is our experience at Edmund Rice Schools that these older children, in particular those considered as unaccompanied minors, face the greatest barriers to their education and wellbeing.

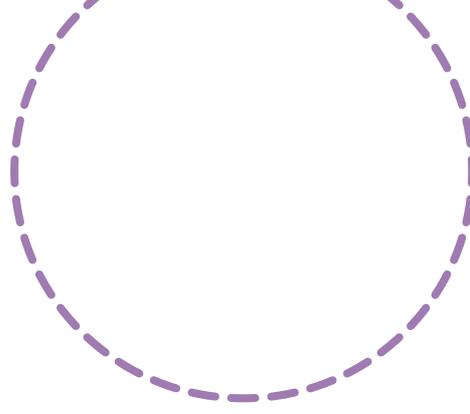
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“

In Syria I used to hate school but school here has a really different atmosphere. It's not just about education – they ask about our mental health and how we're doing. They don't put pressure on us if we can't handle things. They're very caring. I really love that about school.”

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**Student speaking to The Irish Times, April 2019**



## Dedication to disadvantaged students

Many Edmund Rice Schools serve students who face the challenges of coming from disadvantaged communities. Many of our schools are located in inner city locations in Dublin, Cork or Limerick, with almost 100% of families in receipt of social welfare assistance, medical cards, and supportive school meals [breakfast clubs]. At Primary level we serve a significantly higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils than the national figure [53% compared to 21%]. At second level, our proportion of DEIS schools is slightly less than the national average [19% to 26%].

Edmund Rice Schools are also some of the most diverse in the country; many are located in communities where newly arrived families make their homes. One of our North Inner City Dublin schools, for example, 60% of the students were born outside of Ireland, representing 37 nationalities.



My friends are great. They are my mates and they don't care that I live in direct provision. They are smart guys and we all want to go to the University of Limerick. Some of the lads are like me, and some are from Eastern Europe. Others are Irish. We just laugh the whole time."

Senior cycle student

## Schools picking up the pieces

Edmund Rice Schools see ourselves as sanctuary schools for students living in direct provision. Our common Charter obliges our schools to look after the most marginalised students in our community.

However, schools receive no extra support from the Department of Education & Skills or from any other agency for enrolling students from direct provision centres.

This means that Edmund Rice Schools must provide the students with books, copies and other required materials for class. The school will also provide students with new uniforms, as they require them. In general, given the meagre allowances provided to asylum seekers, school boards will also pay the cost of TY, school tours and other activities that are part of the supports for subjects and the general curriculum.

In most cases, English language support is needed and teachers are required to provide intensive, additional supports to engage students in lessons where the subject matter might be beyond the students' current language capacity. Many teachers stay behind and provide additional classes to students.

Our schools work hard, and off their own initiative, to try to find ways for students in direct provision to continue on to third level. Schools often pay the high exam fee for high-achieving students sitting the HPAT, for example, which is necessary to access medical school.

Many schools have looked for donations from philanthropists and charities to fund their students. Others have initiated fundraising events to fund students to fulfil their education ambitions. Schools also canvass third level institutions to explore all possibilities for their students to attend – either through specific access programmes, scholarship programmes or, in some cases, by asking them to waive fees.



## **My one desire is to become a doctor**

We lived in Saudi Arabia for over 25 years, having fled Pakistan to avoid being killed. New laws were introduced in Saudi Arabia around 2017 which impacted on our family's ability to survive. My father made the decision to leave Saudi Arabia which meant I had to leave my education and my friends behind. I was in my final year in school and was on target to qualify for Medicine in university. Unbelievably, I was now an asylum-seeker.

Being a student in Direct Provision can be socially isolating. I have a number of friends in my year group, but I cannot ask them to come to study sessions! There is no appropriate study space in the centre. The best time for me to study is very early in the morning at 4am when it is quiet.

In ten weeks, I will begin my state exams. My one desire is to become a doctor! But if I am successful in obtaining a place on the course there is huge uncertainty as to whether I will actually be able to accept it. I am classified as an International student when it comes to the payment of college fees. It would cost me €45,000 to complete my five years in college. I am aware that everyone is faced with significant fees but for a family that lives off €21.60 per week it will prove impossible for my family to fund my place in college."

# LIVED REALITIES

## Restrictions of direct provision that impact most on our students

These are the experiences and realities of direct provision that have the greatest impact on our students.

### Living in a long-term limbo

The direct provision system was established in the year 2000 to house asylum seekers entering the Irish State in search of international protection. It was initially described as an “interim” system which would provide accommodation for a six month period while people awaited an outcome on their application.

However, the average length of stay is now three years and eight months – way longer than the maximum six months envisaged. For many more, the stay is even longer. It is estimated that about 1,600 people have been in direct provision for five years or more and 600 have been in direct provision for more than seven years.

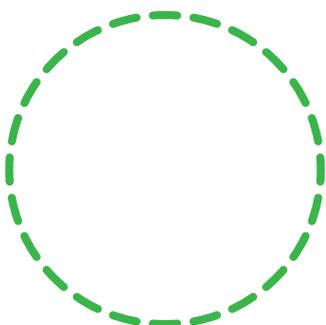
Many of our students have spent over five or six years in the system – the equivalent to most of their primary school education or their entire time in secondary school.

### Life in poverty – work and education restrictions

Currently, there are about 4,300 people in 34 direct provision centres across 17 counties. Of these, over 1,400 are children under 18 years of age (March 2019).

The system restricts them from seeking employment and engaging effectively in education. Residents are not entitled to Social Welfare. Instead they receive an allowance of €21.60 per adult and €10.40 per child, per week.

For our students, this environment, where their parents are not allowed to work and may be struggling with mental health difficulties, depression and distress, can have a very negative impact on their own resilience, their attendance at school and their capacity to learn.





Asylum seekers over the age of 18 are the ‘forgotten people’ as they are too old in the eyes of the system to engage in education. It is unclear to know what over-18s are expected to do, apart from walk around all day as they are not allowed to work.”

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**A student talking about his sister who was over 18 when the family arrived in Ireland.**

## The black market trap

Unaccompanied minors must move into hostels when they reach the age of 18. They often have to work in the black economy to earn money for extra food, phone credit, or clothes, for example. Our principals say that this black-market trap has a detrimental impact on students’ attendance and is often the main reason why students don’t finish their secondary schooling.

## Privacy, homework, quiet and study

There is very little privacy in direct provision centres. Students are living in cramped conditions, surrounded by hundreds of people from a variety of different backgrounds, religions and cultures. Students without families – those who have arrived as unaccompanied minors – share rooms with up to eight others. There are rarely study spaces or quiet places for students to do homework. Our students tell us that they often have to get up in the early hours of the morning to study, as the only time when they might get some quiet.

## Food for the Brain

Food is important for brain development and learning. Students in direct provision centres, and their families, cannot cook for themselves. They are served food, which is often culturally inappropriate, at set times. Students, on limited allowances, find it difficult to bring pack lunches to school. If they arrive back to the centre after 5 or 6 pm they may miss the set evening meal. Even if they do get back in time for evening meals, they will often have nothing else to eat after that time.

## Getting to school

Students in direct provision don’t have money for buses, and sometimes, multiple buses to get from their direct provision centres to their schools. Their families will not have cars. One student had a bike but found it very difficult to get to school after his bike was robbed. There is nobody in the direct provision centres charged with ensuring that children attend school regularly.



There are up to 500 people the hostel. I am in Leaving Certificate, but I share a room with three other guys, different countries, different languages. How can I study? Where do I find the space.”

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**Leaving certificate student, Dublin**

## Widespread mental health difficulties and trauma

Unsurprisingly, depression and mental health problems in the direct provision system are up to five times higher than in the wider community. Many people in direct provision, including our students, have witnessed atrocities, war and violence and are living with unresolved trauma.

There are limited psychological supports available for people in direct provision, including younger people who have either witnessed atrocities, who are living with parents or guardians who may be depressed, or who are depressed or coping with stress and anxiety themselves.

## Shame and Stigma

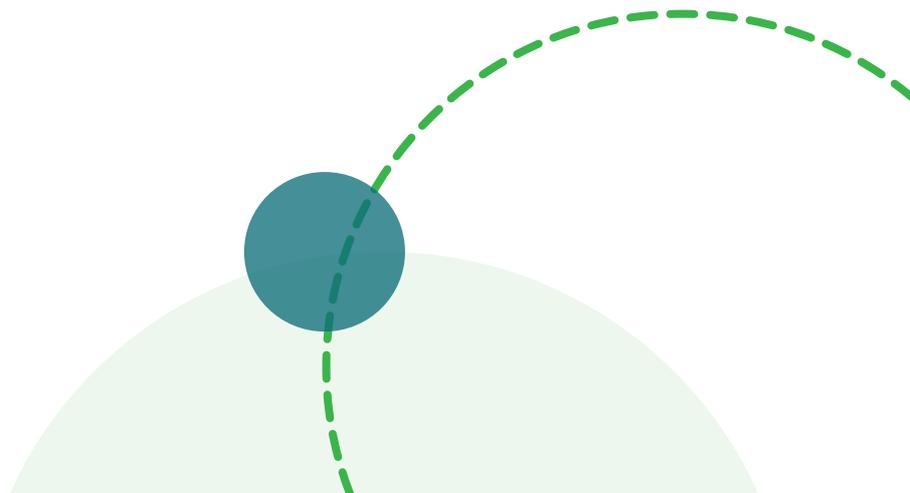
Students living in direct provision rarely, if ever, call their accommodation home. Many say that they are ashamed about where they are living and that they would never invite their school friends to visit them. They avoid talking about life in direct provision because of the stigma it carries. Older siblings and parents of primary school children that they cannot ask their young children's school friends to come over to play or to celebrate special milestones like birthdays.

## Families and students can be uprooted suddenly

Families are often moved from centre to centre. For young people, this causes huge disruption because they have to move on from a school they may have developed relationships and support in. For unaccompanied minors, this movement can cause huge distress, particularly if students are forced to move to new adult-only centres once they pass their 18th birthday.

## Barriers to third-level

Students in direct provision face huge barriers in continuing their education to third level. While the new eligibility criteria for fees is welcome, the additional costs of third level are prohibitive for students and families on a meagre weekly allowance. This means that many high-achieving students who qualify for a third level course cannot progress on to college.



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## We have always been made feel included

Throughout my time in this school I have encountered supportive, caring staff and the students have been more than welcoming. We have always been made feel included by the entire school community. The school has been unbelievably generous to me and my family and has paid the cost of my books, pens, my uniform, and the HPAT that I need to qualify for medicine.

At Christmas, the whole school community donated food hampers to me and my family and this certainly helped to make life more bearable at the centre. We have gone on all school tours because the principal pays for us. My younger brother struggles with the English language and I am the link person between the school and the family to help him. My youngest brother is the most negatively affected by the experience and we are very worried about him.”

Secondary school student

# 20 YEARS IS TOO LONG

## Why direct provision matters to Edmund Rice Schools

Next year, the direct provision service in Ireland, will be in existence for 20 years. As a network of schools, we believe that this is 20 years too long. That is why we will be making direct provision a core element of our advocacy programme across our network for this coming school year, from September 2019 to May 2020.

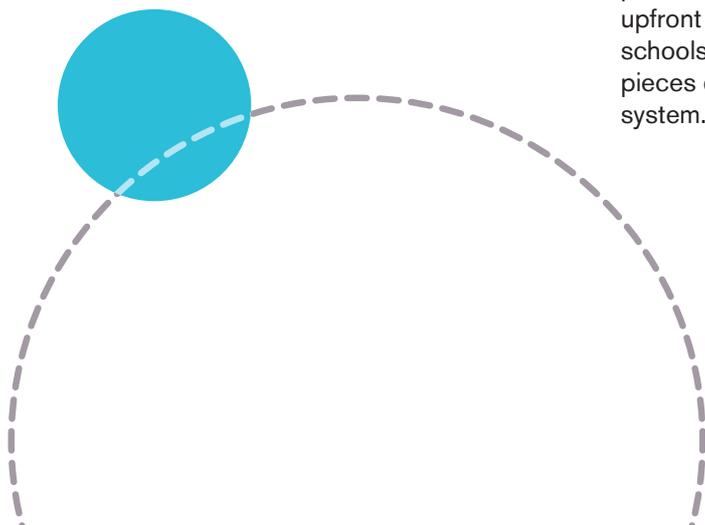
Our hope is that in its 20th year, it will be transformed.

### Warehousing people

The United Nations and other international human rights groups have been critical of the direct provision system. Recently, the Oireachtas Committee on Justice and Equality heard from a variety of different organisations and individuals.

The overwhelming opinion of those who presented was that direct provision system as it currently designed is unsuitable, inhumane, and is causing enormous hardships for those living within the system, often for years.

Edmund Rice Schools would like to join with these groups in voicing our concerns about this system of warehousing people for indefinite periods of time. Many of our schools are seeing, upfront its negative impact. Indeed, many of our schools, and other schools, are picking up the pieces daily for the inadequacies of this broken system.



## So what can we do?

The promotion of the student voice is high on the agenda of the Department of Education & Skills. It is core to the values and work of Edmund Rice Schools, as set out in our Charter.

We will work to raise awareness of the extreme difficulties that people in direct provision, and particularly young people, live with daily.

### 1. Awareness

Our first step will be to work with our schools to raise consciousness throughout our network of the difficulties and injustices that exist within the system of direct provision for their peers (not all of our schools will have contact with fellow students living in direct provision).

### 2. Student Councils and Class-work

We will work with our students, through our student councils and through class-work related to our common Charter, to facilitate them to develop a network-wide campaign as well as actions that they can take in their local communities.

### 3. Advocate

We will advocate collectively as a school network for a humane and respectful solution to a system that is failing to provide the critical supports and responses that are needed by asylum seekers, and particularly children and young people growing up in the system.

## Power of young people

It is clear that young people in Ireland today have a strong sense of social justice and have an ambition to reduce inequalities in our society. We are seeing it in recent months with the Climate Change Strikes.

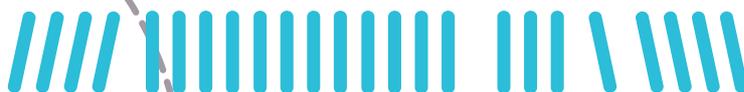
Our Edmund Rice Schools have already worked together to campaign on the need to end homelessness. Recently, a number of our schools worked together to raise awareness about the need to end the use of single use plastics.

## 37,000 voices

There are over 37,000 students in our schools. These young people, together with their families and teachers, can be a powerful voice for change.

Nineteen years have passed since the introduction of the direct provision system in Ireland. Next year, will mark its 20th anniversary.

The only right thing to do to mark this anniversary year, is to work to reform it and to put in place a system of welcome that is compassionate, respectful, short-term, and above else, fair.



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## Time to take a stand

We are an Edmund Rice School and our Charter obliges us to look after the most needy and the most marginalised people. The key elements of the Charter and my own values will ensure this school community continues to take care of the students from direct provision and their families.

It's terribly frustrating that a system which is so obviously flawed has been allowed to continue in this way, and we, as citizens have been relatively quiet about it.

It's time to take a stand and I'm glad that Edmund Rice Schools will be to the fore in taking this stand.”

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**Principal**



Iontaobhas Scoileanna Éamainn Rís  
Edmund Rice Schools Trust

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