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**RETHINK
IRELAND** Our
Social
Innovation
Fund



Why Wellbeing Matters

LEARNINGS FROM
THE EVALUATIONS OF
RETHINK IRELAND'S
EDUCATION FUND, YOUTH
FUNDS, AND CHILDREN
AND YOUTH FUNDS
(2017-2022)

**YOUTH REPORT
APRIL 2025**

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Scan me to read all the reports included in this research

Introduction

At Rethink Ireland, we work towards a more just, equal and sustainable Ireland. We do this by providing funding and other support to non-profit organisations* in Ireland.

We want to make sure all children and young people in Ireland can reach their full potential. To achieve this, we set up three Rethink Ireland Funds* that supported projects run by non-profit organisations. Some of these organisations helped young people to progress their education in school or through what is known as alternative education*. Others helped strengthen young people’s mental health.

At the same time, we asked a team of researchers at the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at the University of Galway to complete evaluations* of the three funds and to report on what they learned so that we and others can use this information to help support all children and young people in Ireland to reach their full potential. This report summarises our learnings from the evaluations.



Photo - Narrative 4, awardee of the Youth Funds 2018-2021

Words marked with an asterisk are explained here:

Non-profit organisation: A non-profit organisation is a group that helps people or supports a cause without trying to make a profit. Any money they earn is used to support their mission, like helping those who are sick or protecting the environment.

Fund: A fund is a pool of money collected for a specific purpose, such as helping people to get a better education or get a job. That money is then given to groups or individuals who need it to work towards that purpose.

Alternative education is a different way of learning for students whose needs are not met or fully met by the mainstream education system. This can include special education programmes or schools that focus on hands-on learning instead of traditional exams. It helps students who need a different approach to succeed.

Evaluation: Evaluation is the process of checking how well something works. It helps decide if for example, an organisation has achieved what it set out to do and if not, what can be improved.

What does the report cover?

The report has four main sections:

What is the problem?

This section provides information about what we now know about education and mental health outcomes* and how these differ for some young people in Ireland. It explains why Rethink Ireland set up the three funds and organised the evaluations.

What did we do?

This section provides information about Rethink Ireland and the three funds that were created. It also provides information about the aim of the evaluations and how the research team completed the evaluations.

What did we find out?

This section explains what the research team found out through their evaluations (the findings*).

What should happen next?

This section reflects on what the findings mean and what we think needs to happen next (the recommendations*).

Words marked with an asterisk are explained here:

Outcomes: An outcome is the result of something that happens or that you do. It’s what you finally end up with after an action or event – like getting a good grade after studying, or a team winning a game.

Findings: Findings are the results or discoveries from research, experiments, or investigations. They tell us what was learned, like when a psychologist tests whether a new type of therapy helps people feel better.

Recommendations: Recommendations are suggestions or advice on what to do next, based on the research findings in this case. They help people and organisations make better choices.

What is the problem?

Here are some interesting facts from existing research, about how Irish young people do in education and how well they feel about their mental health.

Young People and their Education

The way in which schools work in Ireland does not help all young people to do well and progress their education. For example, approximately one in twelve young people who start secondary school never complete their Leaving Certificate.¹ In addition, students in poorer areas are much more likely to drop out of school compared to those in wealthier areas.

What young people involved in our research said

The research team asked five young people who had been involved in some of the funded projects to be part of an advisory panel and help with the research. Here is what they had to say about their experiences of education in Ireland.

“Right now, there is often a narrow-minded thinking of what constitutes education. We need to broaden our understanding of what education is, and who education providers are. Education can happen in so many different places, not just in traditional school settings. There is always a need in society for something different. We don't have to replace the whole thing as it is, we are simply looking for equity of access, that all young people have the same opportunities.”

Youth advisory panel member 1

“Education is so important, now more than ever. We all spend so much of our lives in the education system, with more and more focus on the third level or further education, for any kind of career, lengthening the amount of young peoples' lives are centred around education and the 'education system'. But there are clearly gaps in the system. Some young people feel excluded from Ireland's education system, as we understand it. When you are young, you shouldn't feel excluded from society. The system can fail young people, it cannot be the other way around – that young people fail the system.”

Youth advisory panel member 2

Young People and their Mental Health

Young people's mental health and wellbeing have a big influence on their sense of who they are, quality of life, and relationships with friends, teachers and others. Our teenage and early adult years are a critical period of development, with 50% of mental problems appearing by age 14 and 75% by age 25². This is why we need to step in earlier to prevent these problems and support young people to look after their mental and physical wellbeing from early on.

My World Survey 2 is the largest study of mental health in young people in Ireland. The most recent results show an increase in the levels of depression and anxiety of Irish adolescents. However, they showed that they have good insights into their mental health and help-seeking behaviours.³

What young people involved in our research said

If we just take one of the organisations that worked with young people on their mental health, we can get a better idea of their work.

The Rainbow Club for Autism, based in Cork, provides support to children and young people with autism and their families. The centre creates a safe, non-judgmental space where participants can be themselves, fostering self-confidence, social skills, and mental wellbeing.

As mentioned by most of the young people interviewed for the research, Rainbow Club taught them how to manage themselves, deal with social anxiety, and daily chores and tasks.

“I guess beforehand it was social anxiety I guess, like I was terrified of speaking with people just from issues I have had with people in school and stuff, so I was just super quiet as in talking to people. But it really brought me out of my shell. And especially being over with all the staff over there, it really helped build my confidence. (Young person 5, Interview)”

Rainbow Club youth participant 1

“I think my favourite of all the things so far has been the teen hub because I have made some great friends there [...] I am still quite an anxious person, but I am not nearly as bad as I used to be, and I have like found supports and friends who support me and the people around me who support me as well. So that is like the biggest change I think, mentally I have become a bit better. (Young person 1, Interview)”

Rainbow Club youth participant 2

¹ Department of Education and Skills (2020). Retention Rates of Pupils in Second-Level Schools. Entry Cohort 2013. Dublin: DES.

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>

³ <https://www.myworldsurvey.ie/full-report>

What did we do?

Rethink Ireland decided to set up three funds to support projects focused on reducing differences in education and mental health outcomes for young people in Ireland:

The Education Fund (2017-2020)	The Youth Funds (2018-2021)	The Children and Youth Funds (2019-2022):
<p>The Education Fund funded 10 projects supporting learners to progress from Level 3 to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications*. It aimed to improve access to third-level education for students affected by educational disadvantage*.</p> <p>The total Fund value was €7.8 million.</p>	<p>The Youth Funds funded 15 projects focused on reducing differences in education and mental health outcomes for young people in Ireland.</p> <p>The total Fund value was over €10 million.</p>	<p>The Children and Youth Funds funded 14 projects focused on reducing differences in education and mental health outcomes for young people in Ireland.</p> <p>The total Fund value was over €9.5 million.</p>

The research team then set out to assess to what extent and how the projects supported young people to progress their education and strengthen their mental health. We wanted to create evidence that decision makers could use to make better decisions.

If you are interested to read more, we've produced a report and an executive summary for each fund as well as an overall summary report on the three funds.⁴

Words marked with an asterisk are explained here:

National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ): The NFQ is like a ladder that shows the different levels of education and qualifications you can achieve in Ireland. It has 10 levels, starting from basic learning (Level 1) to advanced degrees like PhDs (Level 10). For example, the Junior Certificate is around Level 3. It helps students and employers understand how different qualifications compare and the different educational paths they can take.

Educational disadvantage: Educational disadvantage is when some people get less out of the education system than others. Educational disadvantage can result in poor levels of participation or achievement in the formal education system. Children may be disadvantaged, for example, because of disability, ill health, difficulties with reading or writing, or poverty.

4 These documents can be found at <https://rethinkireland.ie/whywellbeingmatters/>

Our approach to the evaluation

The research team, the funded projects and Rethink Ireland worked together to decide how the projects would be evaluated. Of all the projects funded, 24 participated in the evaluation process and 19 fully completed the process.

The research team used a new way of trying to understand the work of the projects and how the young people valued that help, through what is called Social Return on Investment (SROI).

Let's imagine this ... you have a coffee truck and bring it to your local football grounds on the day of a match or training. You spend money on the truck, a coffee machine, coffee and the cups. In return, you make money when people buy your coffee. That's a simple way of thinking about Return on Investment (ROI)*.

Now, let's think about something bigger, like a community playground in your area. People donate money to build it, but instead of making money back, the return they get is in the smiles and happiness of the children playing there, the friendships they make, and how it helps them grow strong and be healthy. This is what Social Return on Investment (SROI)* means.

SROI is a way to measure how much good comes from the money spent on something that helps people. Instead of just looking at the amount of money made, SROI looks at how to understand things like happier families, healthier kids, and stronger communities.

So, for our study, the research team wanted to find out what new skills young people learned, for example, and how those skills helped them to continue their education and have better mental health.

As well as doing the SROI, the research team asked young people to take photos of the things most important to them about their experiences with the projects and to write a note to explain their choices.



Words marked with an asterisk are explained here:

Return on investment (ROI): This is how much you gain compared to what you spend. If you spend €1 on something and then sell it for €8, then the ROI is the extra €7 you got. It is a way of measuring how much something is worth.

Social return on investment (SROI): This is about measuring the real impact of money spent. Not just in euros, but in how much good it does for people and the community. SROI asks: "How much positive change did we create and what is that worth?"

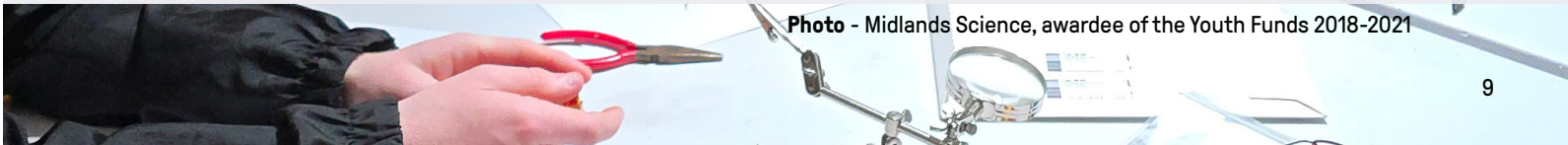


Photo - Midlands Science, awardee of the Youth Funds 2018-2021

What did we find out?

Key finding 1: The social impact of these projects on young people

By using the Social Return on Investment (SROI) method, we discovered the real benefits young people gained from these projects.

When we looked at the results across all three Funds, we found **16 key social outcomes***, plus one extra category for anything that didn't quite fit.

These outcomes shown below include important life skills like **community engagement**, **empathy**, and **resilience**—helping young people grow, connect, and feel more confident.

This information provides us with strong proof of how projects **positively change young peoples' lives**.

Table 1 – The Social Outcomes achieved and most valued by Participants from across the three Rethink Ireland Funds



Key finding 2: The total 'social value' created and the return on investment

Going back to our coffee truck idea from earlier, we then looked at how much **social value*** was created by projects using a **Social Return on Investment (SROI) approach**. Basically, this helped us see how much positive change happened for every €1 invested. Here's what we found across the three funds:

Education Fund

TOTAL SOCIAL VALUE CREATED: **€68 million**
INVESTMENT: **€7.8 million** (over 3 years)
RETURN ON INVESTMENT: **€9 of social value for every €1 invested**

Youth Funds

TOTAL SOCIAL VALUE CREATED: **€60 million**
INVESTMENT: **€7.6 million** (over 3 years)
RETURN ON INVESTMENT: **€8 of social value for every €1 invested**

Children and Youth Funds

TOTAL SOCIAL VALUE CREATED: **€17.2 million**
INVESTMENT: **€2.8 million** (over 3 years)
RETURN ON INVESTMENT: **€6 of social value for every €1 invested**

Therefore, imagine this - across all three Funds, the total social value created was **€145 million** from an **€18 million investment**, meaning that for every €1 invested about **€8 of social value was generated**. This shows just how powerful these projects are in changing lives and creating positive social impact for their participants.

Words marked with an asterisk are explained here:

Social value: This is the overall positive impact of an activity or project on people and the community. Social value is not just about financial benefits. It includes economic, social, and environmental outcomes that contribute to wellbeing, quality of life, and sustainable development.

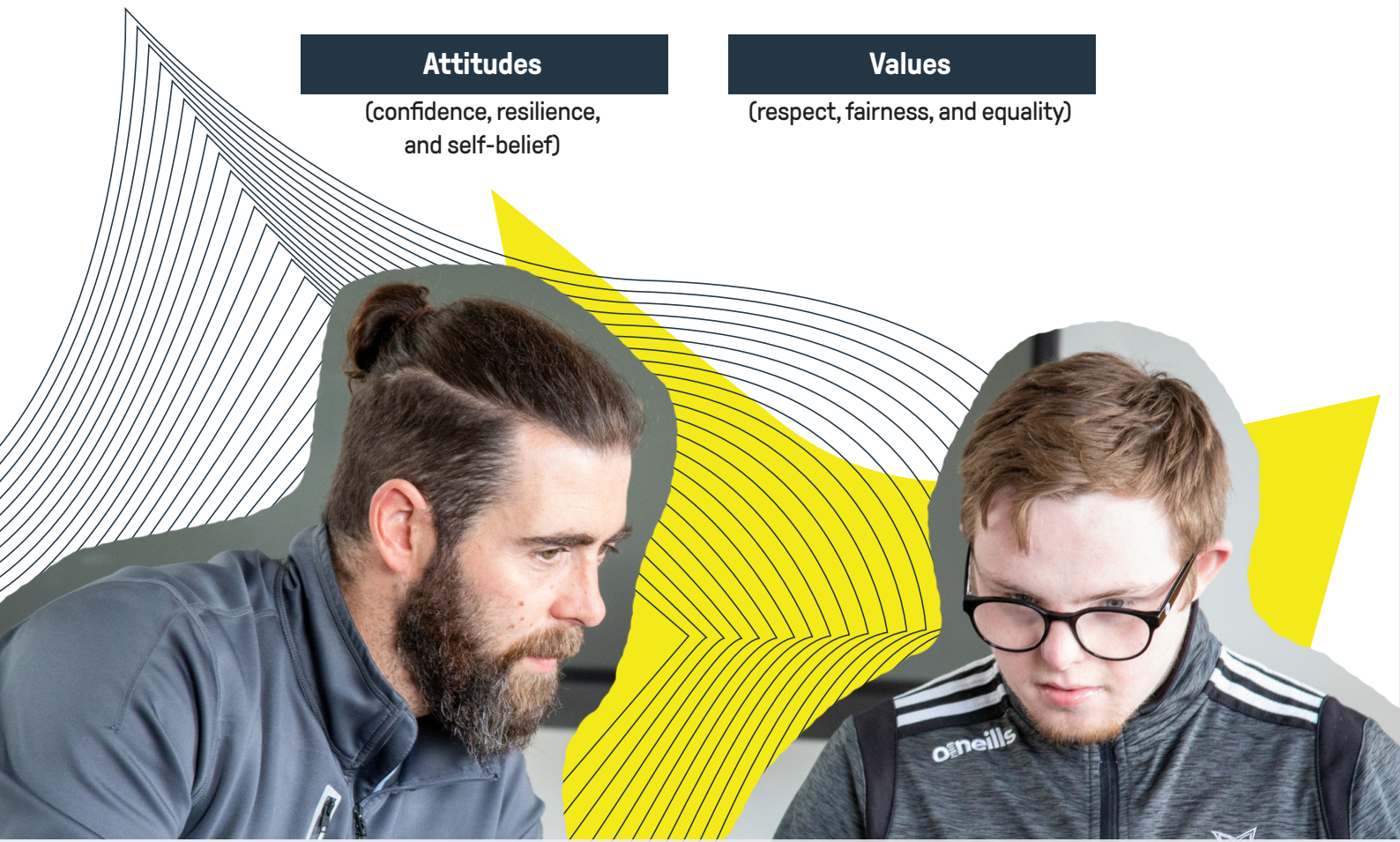
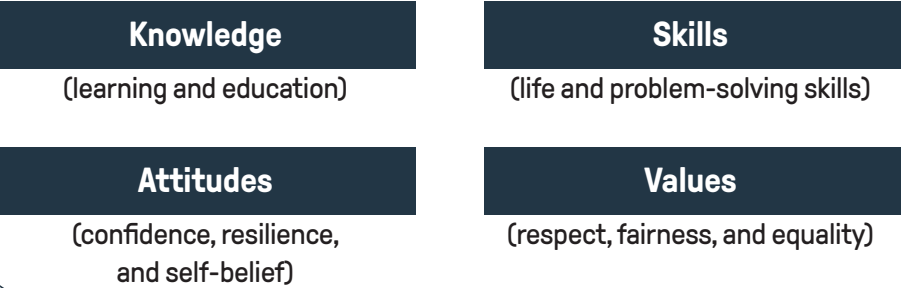
Key finding 3: The approaches that supported young people’s well-being

We found that each project helps young people in different ways, and we wanted to understand exactly how they do it. By looking at the data, we explored what happens inside these projects - their practices, processes, and key actions - to see what really makes a difference.

Similar to studies in other countries, we found that these projects create safe and supportive spaces where students can build positive relationships and feel more in control of their lives.

By analysing feedback from participants, we identified the key actions used by projects that helped improve young people’s overall wellbeing*. These insights give us a better understanding of what works best in supporting youth through these programmes e.g., creating meaningful relationships with young people, focusing on their overall wellbeing and being supportive and non-judgemental.

We found that these projects helped young people build strong foundations in these areas:



Words marked with an asterisk are explained here:

Well-being: This means feeling good in your body and mind. It’s about being healthy, happy, and able to handle life’s ups and downs. Taking care of your wellbeing includes things like eating well, getting enough sleep, spending time with friends, and managing stress.

Photo - Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, awardee of the Education Fund 2017-2020

Key finding 4: An ‘evidence-based model’ for improving educational and mental health outcomes

Based on the findings from our research, we have been able to create a new evidence-based model*, to bring all the important elements together. The model is built around this belief - *to truly overcome educational inequality and improve youth mental health, we need to focus on well-being first. When young people feel safe, supported, and empowered, they can learn, grow, and reach their full potential.*

Our new model gives us a clear path to making education and youth mental health better, fairer, and more supportive for everyone. Here are the key parts of it in a little more detail:

- 1. Education & Mental Health Go Together** - The projects we studied weren’t just about schoolwork or mental health alone - they focused on the whole person. That means helping young people feel confident, capable, and supported in every aspect of their lives.
- 2. Strength-Based Support** - Instead of only fixing problems, these projects focused on what young people are good at and built on their strengths. They helped develop skills, knowledge, and positive mindsets to set young people up for success.
- 3. Well-Being Is More Than Just Feeling Ok** - Well-being isn’t just about mental health—it includes academic, physical, emotional, and social well-being too. Schools, youth groups, and mental health services all play a role in helping young people thrive, not just survive.
- 4. A Focus On The Future** - To build a better future, young people need strong foundations in the areas of Knowledge (learning and education), Skills (life and problem-solving skills), Attitudes (confidence, resilience, and self-belief) and Values (respect, fairness, and equality). By strengthening these areas, young people can feel more in control of their future and achieve their goals.
- 5. Policy & Practice Must Work Together** - If we want real change, governments, schools, youth organisations and anybody that works closely with young people need to work together to embed well-being into policies and programmes for young people. This means focusing on long-term solutions, not just short-term fixes.

Words marked with an asterisk are explained here:

Evidence-based model: An evidence-based model means making decisions based on facts and research instead of opinions or guesses. It’s like using proven study techniques to get better grades, instead of just hoping for the best. People use evidence-based models in medicine, education, and other areas to make sure what they do actually works!

Key finding 5: A new understanding of alternative education

We decided it was important to look at the funded projects in relation to the mainstream education* system.

By doing this, we have provided, for the first time, a way of categorising alternative educational supports in Ireland. This also challenges our current understanding of alternative education* in Ireland.

Ultimately, this helps us to better understand how our overall education system works and how it can be improved to better support all children and young people.



Words marked with an asterisk are explained here:

Mainstream education is where most students come together to learn, attending their local primary and secondary schools, for example. It includes a set curriculum, standard subjects, exams, and a structured learning environment.

Alternative education is a different way of learning for students whose needs are not met or fully met by the mainstream education system. This can include special education programmes or schools that focus on hands-on learning instead of traditional exams. It helps students who need a different approach to succeed.

Photo - Sing Out with Strings, awardee of the Youth Funds 2018-2021

What should happen next?

There are a few key messages and suggested actions coming out of this research:

- 1

We need to focus on ways to support the long-term health and wellbeing of children and young people in our education and healthcare systems. We now know the specific approaches that work. This knowledge needs to be reflected in our policies and our practices. This research has produced a tool that can help us to do that.
- 2

We need a new understanding of alternative education, and this research offers a new definition:

Alternative education constitutes educational projects addressing diverse issues connected to educational inequality and diversity (i.e. socio-economic, mental health and intellectual disability), operating inside and outside of the mainstream education system, supporting students' life-long learning through innovative formal and informal teaching approaches.
- 3

Alternative education helps make sure everyone gets a fair chance to learn and stay healthy. It's important and should get the support and funding it needs.
- 4

Social innovations and social enterprises can help create positive change in communities and should be supported.
- 5

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a great way to measure the impact of projects and learn what actually works. More funding is needed to support and expand the use of SROI.





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- An Cosán (Virtual Community College)
- Aspire2
- Citywise Education (Fast Track Academy)
- Cork Life Centre
- iScoil
- Trinity Access 21
- Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities

Youth Funds

- Beacon of Light Counselling Centre (The Breakthrough Programme)
- Corpus Christi Primary School, Moyross
- Foróige (Futures & Leadership for Life)
- Gaisce (Like Minded)
- Irish Chamber Orchestra (Sing Out with Strings)
- Junior Achievement Ireland (My Future, My Business)
- Midlands Science
- Raheen Wood ALFA Secondary School
- Narrative 4 (The Empathy Project)
- The Soar Foundation (The Hustle Programme)

Children and Youth Funds

- DCU Changemaker Schools Network
- DCU FUSE
- Engage in Education
- Rainbow Club Cork Centre for Autism
- Solas Cancer Support Centre
- TU Dublin Access to Apprenticeship



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