



NAVIGATING EDUCATION

THE EXPERIENCES OF FAMILIES UNDER INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION



NPC

SUPPORTING PARENTS
SUPPORTING CHILDREN

NPC Vision

The National Parents Council want to see an Ireland where every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential

NPC Mission

The National Parents Council exists to ensure that all parents are supported and empowered to become effective partners in their children's education. NPC will work to increase the capacity and capability of the education sector, to achieve true partnership and deliver better outcomes for all children and young people.

Values

NPC knows that when parents and schools work together, children do better. Therefore, NPC believes that in order to achieve this parents must feel:

Engaged: Parents must be actively engaged in the education of their children.

Supported: Parents' involvement in children's education must be supported by the attitudes, beliefs and practices of all members of the school and broader education community.

Partners: Parents must be viewed as partners in facilitating children's learning and be supported in this role by the school and broader education community.

Valued: Parents should be viewed as full partners in the decisions that affect their children and their family.

Welcomed: Parents should be welcome in the school, and their support and assistance sought as a valuable resource to support children's education in the school.

Connected: All communication and dialogue with parents must be regular, open, two-way and meaningful.

National Parents Council

Key Activities

SERVICE DELIVERY

NPC's services are developed to empower parents so that they can support their children in all aspects of education.

HELPLINE

The NPC helpline is a national confidential service for parents. The helpline staff listen and give information and support to parents to help them make the best possible decisions for and with their children.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The NPC Training and Development programme is a national programme of training, development and support for parents. The purpose is to empower parents to play an active part in their child's education at every level.

WEBSITE

The NPC's website www.npc.ie aims to provide parents with information regarding education at early years, primary and post primary levels.

ADVOCACY

NPC engages in awareness-raising activities and campaigning and lobbying at a national level on the objectives of its Strategic Plan.

REPRESENTING PARENTS

NPC represents the voice of parents through representation on external bodies and other mediums. NPC consults with parents and brings parents' views to bear on education policy.

BUILDING PARTICIPATION

NPC builds participation strategies and activities to ensure parents and children are an integral part of the work of NPC.

Introduction

This report by the National Parents Council (NPC) highlights the experiences of families living in a Centre for International Protection Applicants at Rathmines as they navigate access to education in Ireland. Education plays an important role in helping children and their families settle into a new country, and having access to schools with the right support can significantly impact their lives.

Through this report, NPC aims to shed light on the challenges, successes, and needs of families within the system. The report explores key themes such as access to school placements, communication between families and schools, financial barriers, and the social and educational adjustments required by both children and parents. By exploring these areas, the report seeks to identify opportunities for improvement, with the ultimate goal of fostering inclusivity, equity, and better outcomes for children under international protection.

The findings in this report were collected in September 2024 through interviews conducted with 11 families living in the Rathmines Centre. The interviews, facilitated by translators, were conducted in the families' native languages. These families, representing diverse backgrounds, shared their experiences navigating the education system for their children, covering early years, primary, and post-primary levels. Insights from the Centre Manager, who plays a vital role in advocating for school placements and supporting these families, are also included.



Families Interviewed

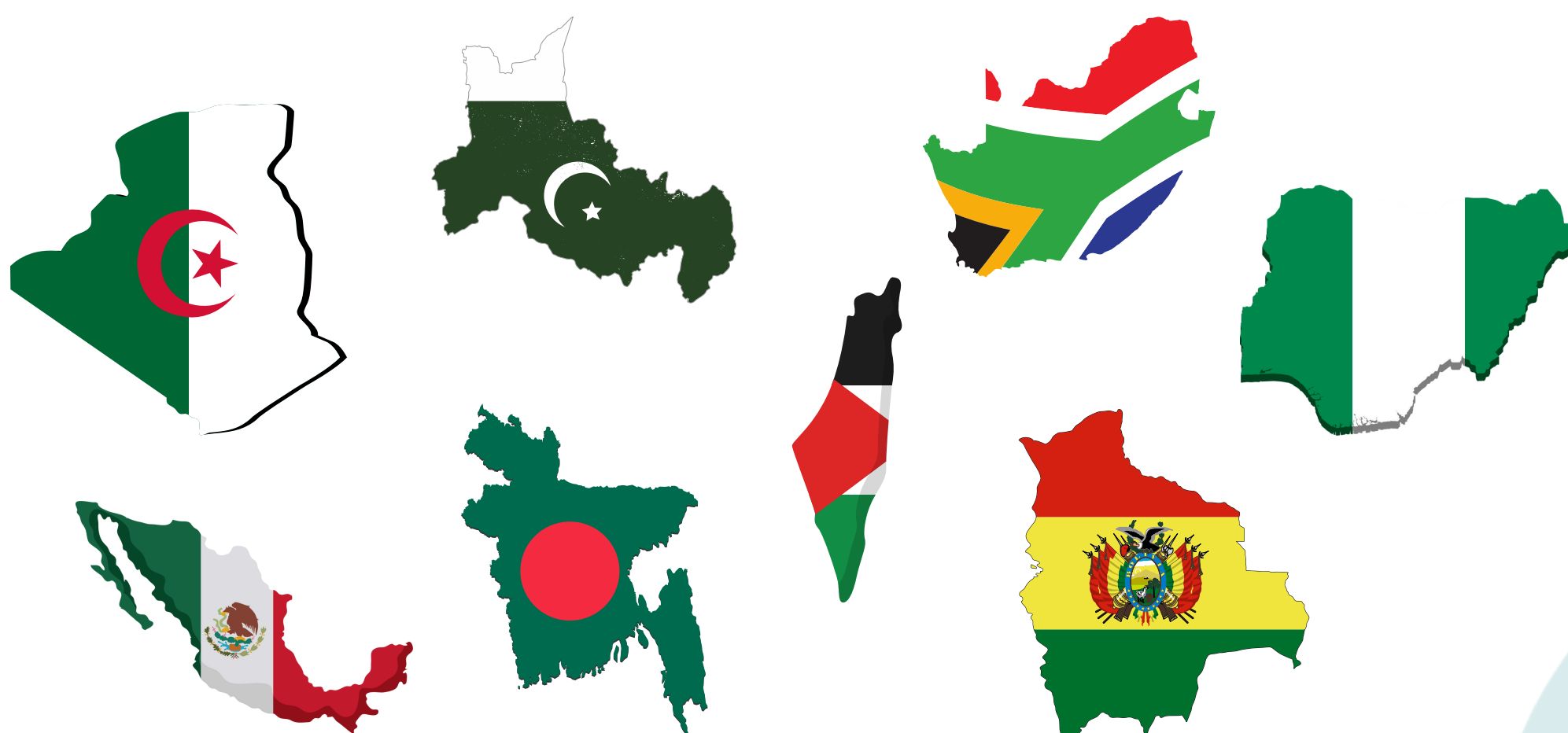
The report includes interviews with 11 families living in a Centre for International Protection Applicants in Rathmines. These families represent a wide range of countries, including Algeria, Palestine, Nigeria, South Africa, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Mexico, and Bolivia. The interviews focused mainly on mothers, highlighting their efforts to navigate the Irish education system for their children.

The families have children of various ages, from as young as five to 18 years old, spanning early years, primary, and post-primary education levels. Below is the breakdown of families interviewed:

- A Mexican woman with two sons, both aged 7
- A Bolivian woman with a 6-year-old daughter
- Bangladeshi parents with three children: a 5-year-old son and twin 7-year-olds
- Pakistani parents with three children: an 18-year-old son and 16-year-old twins (a boy and a girl)
- A Palestinian woman with four children aged 8, 11, 14, and 17
- An Algerian woman with two children aged 9 and 11
- A Palestinian woman with two children aged 6 and 9
- A South African woman with an 8-year-old son
- A Nigerian woman with a 16-year-old daughter
- A Nigerian woman with four children aged 6, 11, 13, and 15
- A South African woman with one child in primary school

Centre Manager Interviewed

The report includes interview findings with Majella, the centre manager for the international protection applicants in Rathmines. She has been in this role for 12 months, having transitioned from the homeless services sector. Majella oversees the daily operations and works closely with support staff to assist residents. Her leadership aims to provide a safe and supportive environment for families from diverse backgrounds.



Interviews' Findings

For this report, parents living in the centre for international protection applicants in Rathmines were interviewed about their experiences with the Irish education system for their children. The interviews included 9 questions to get feedback and better understand the challenges faced by families seeking asylum.

1- How long have you been in Ireland? What age is your child? What class are they in?

The families interviewed for this report reflect a diverse array of backgrounds, each with distinct stories about their arrival in Ireland and their children's educational experiences. These families come from various regions, speak different languages, and have arrived in Ireland at different times, leading to a wide range of experiences as they navigate the Irish education system.

One Urdu-speaking family from Bangladesh arrived in Ireland in May 2024. This family includes children aged 5 and 7. The younger child is currently enrolled in early years education, while the 7-year-old twins are in second class in a primary school. Another Urdu-speaking family, originally from Pakistan, has been in Ireland since November 2021. Their eldest child, who is 18 years old, has already completed the Leaving Certificate and is now pursuing a post-Leaving Certificate course. Meanwhile, their 16-year-old twins, a boy and a girl, have completed the junior cycle and are preparing to transition into the senior cycle of education.

Arabic-speaking families included in the report offer similarly varied experiences. One Palestinian family arrived in Ireland on July 5, 2024, while a second Palestinian family followed on July 11, 2024. Between these two arrivals, a family from Algeria arrived in October 2023. The children in these families are in various stages of adjustment, each facing unique challenges as they adapt to the Irish educational system and integrate into Irish society.



The experiences of Spanish-speaking families also highlight the challenges encountered in this transition. A woman from Bolivia arrived in Ireland in January 2023, and her 6-year-old daughter is now in her second year of school. The child is adjusting well to her new educational environment. By contrast, a woman from Mexico, who arrived with her two 7-year-old sons, faces significant challenges due to ongoing uncertainty surrounding her legal status. As a result, her children are not currently attending school.

English-speaking families from South Africa and Nigeria also bring their own perspectives to this report. These families, who arrived in Ireland between December 2023 and May 2024, have children aged between 6 and 16. The children are enrolled in both primary and post-primary schools, contributing further to the diversity of experiences represented.

The centre manager confirmed the details provided by the families and noted that they have been in the centre for varying durations. The children's ages range widely, with most attending local primary schools. However, the secondary school placements have been particularly pronounced.

2- What worked well for your child at school?

Families from a variety of cultural backgrounds shared positive reflections on their children's educational experiences in Irish schools. Despite facing initial challenges in adapting to a new country and education system, many parents emphasised the supportive aspects of their children's schooling and the opportunities it has provided. This section details these experiences across the different language groups represented in the report.

One Urdu-speaking family shared that their children have adapted well to their school environment and enjoy attending daily. However, they noted the challenge of travelling to a school located far from their accommodation, compounded by the absence of a bus service. As a result, the parents walk their children to school each day. Despite this logistical difficulty, the children have thrived academically and socially in the school setting. Another Urdu-speaking family expressed satisfaction with the overall admissions process and appreciated the provision of a school bus at a previous residence. They noted that their eldest child, who successfully completed the Leaving Certificate, transitioned smoothly into a post-Leaving Certificate programme.

Families within the Arabic-speaking groups also highlighted positive experiences. A Palestinian family emphasised the understanding and open communication demonstrated by their child's school, particularly regarding cultural differences, which significantly aided their child's integration. Similarly, another Palestinian family praised the school's tolerance and respect for other cultures, as well as its strong communication, which enabled their child to adjust smoothly. The family from Algeria reported no complaints about their child's education, expressing satisfaction with their overall schooling experience.

Spanish-speaking families shared unique perspectives on the Irish education system. A family from Bolivia highlighted the advanced nature of the system compared to their home country. They were particularly impressed with the respectful treatment of their daughter and the system's emphasis on encouraging children to express themselves freely, which they viewed as an advantage. Another family, originally from Mexico, valued the schools' emphasis on fostering greater independence among children in the classroom. They noted that these differences fostered a sense of individuality and respect, which was a welcome change from their experiences in Mexico.

English-speaking families from South Africa and Nigeria also described their children's positive academic progress and gradual adaptation to the Irish school environment. However, they mentioned challenges related to extracurricular activities, particularly the financial barriers to participating in activities or obtaining necessary school materials. Despite these obstacles, the families viewed their children's integration into school life as a positive outcome.

The centre manager echoed the positive views shared by families and highlighted the efforts of local primary schools to support newcomers. Schools were noted for providing second-hand uniforms and assisting families with covering costs where needed. Additionally, schools have been funded to employ extra teachers to support children who speak English as a second language, ensuring they receive the help necessary to succeed academically and socially.

3- What do you and your children like about the current education system?

When asked about what they and their children appreciate in the current education system, families from various backgrounds shared a range of positive experiences. Their responses consistently reflected gratitude for supportive school environments, a strong emphasis on respect for individuality, and the provision of opportunities for children to thrive academically and socially.

Urdu-speaking families reported that their children genuinely enjoy attending school, particularly because of the engaging activities and the dedication of the teaching staff. The enthusiasm of these children is evident in their desire to remain in their current schools. Positive experiences with sports, diverse learning activities, and the welcoming atmosphere have significantly contributed to their overall love for education.

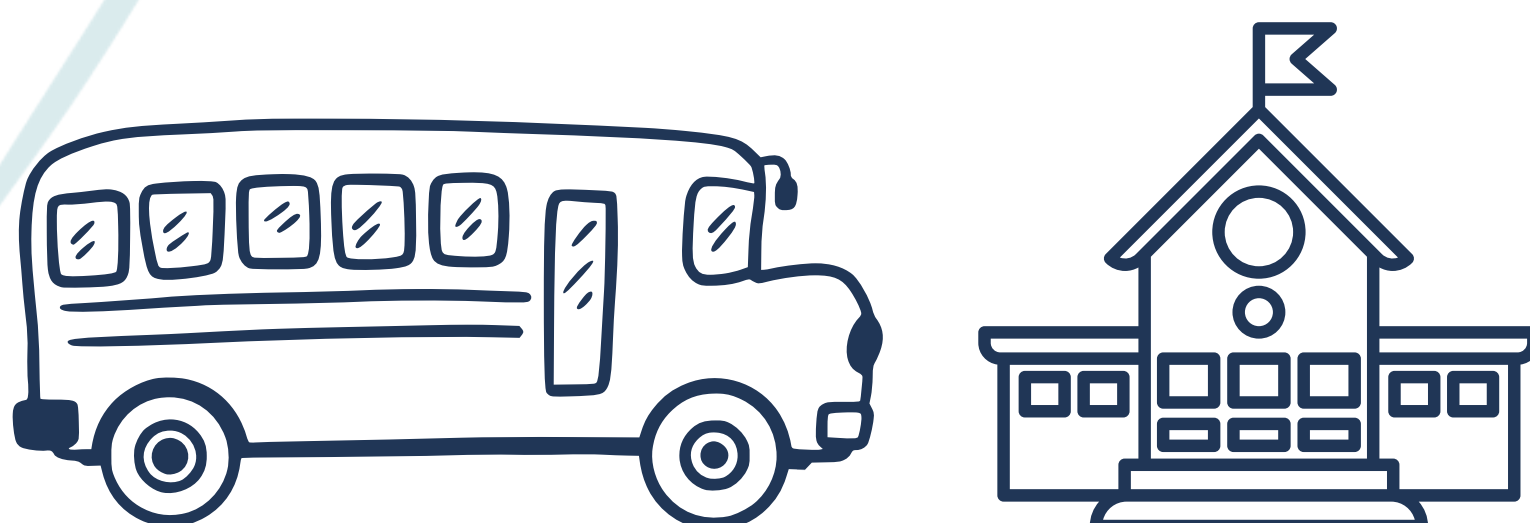
Arabic-speaking families expressed appreciation for the inclusive and welcoming nature of Irish schools. They noted that schools have been proactive in accommodating the specific needs of both parents and children, which has fostered a sense of comfort and reassurance. This support has greatly enhanced their children's educational experience.

Spanish-speaking families also conveyed satisfaction with the Irish education system. A Bolivian family highlighted that the system is more advanced than what they were accustomed to in their home country. They appreciated how their daughter was treated with respect and encouraged to express herself freely, which they saw as a key strength of the system. Similarly, a Mexican family valued the lighter burden of school supplies compared to their previous experiences, as well as the emphasis on independence and the respect for individuality within classrooms. They found these aspects particularly refreshing and empowering.

English-speaking families praised the structured nature of Irish schools and the support provided to both children and parents during the settling-in process. Children especially enjoyed participating in extracurricular activities, which added to their overall positive experience, but they were not able to fully participate in those activities and other school events because of financial barriers. Parents, too, appreciated the organisation and adaptability of the education system.

4- What challenges have you and your child faced with the Irish Education System?

While many families acknowledge and appreciate aspects of the Irish education system, they also face numerous challenges in navigating their children's schooling. These difficulties span logistical, financial, cultural, and systemic barriers, which often impact both parents and children.



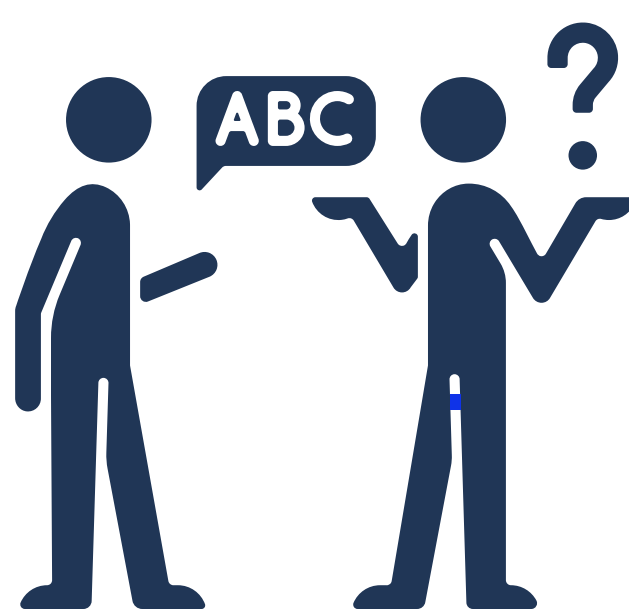
Urdu-speaking families told us that they frequently encounter challenges related to the lack of a school bus service, compounded by the long distances between their accommodation and schools. This situation places both financial and time pressures on families, especially those who must rely on public transportation, often involving multiple transfers. Additionally, language barriers, particularly for parents, hinder effective communication with schools and reduce their ability to engage fully in their children's education. Adding to these challenges, the lack of suitable study spaces in their living environments further hinders children's ability to learn effectively at home.

Arabic-speaking families reported notable delays in securing school placements for post-primary children, leaving some without access to education for extended periods. Cultural concerns have also emerged as a significant challenge, particularly surrounding the inclusion of topics such as homosexuality in the curriculum. The families we spoke to felt conflicted, believing that such topics are inconsistent with their values and should not be part of their children's education.

The Spanish-speaking families we met primarily struggle with language barriers. Those parents often find it difficult to communicate in English, which limits their ability to engage with schools and participate in their children's educational journey. Although children tend to adapt to the language more quickly, limited access to English language courses for parents remains a challenge. Legal uncertainties increase these problems for one Spanish-speaking family, as unresolved immigration statuses disrupt their children's school attendance and stability.

English-speaking families, while not affected by language barriers, report difficulties stemming from financial pressures and logistical challenges. The costs of school materials, uniforms, and extracurricular activities are often prohibitive, limiting their children's participation in a well-rounded educational experience. Delays in school placements, coupled with communication gaps between schools and families, create additional hurdles in the adjustment process.

The centre manager highlighted secondary school placements as one of the most significant challenges. Many local secondary schools are private and impose strict admission requirements, including financial and religious criteria, that exclude many families.



Financial burdens are another pressing issue, particularly for families in direct provision. Uniforms, books, and basic technology are required for post-primary school students, as this presents significant challenges. In one case, a 1st-year student could only afford a rental iPad, which could not be taken home, limiting her ability to complete homework. According to the centre manager, the back-to-school allowance has proven insufficient, especially for secondary school students. Majella mentioned one mother who spent the allowance on books but was left unable to afford a uniform, and her application for additional social welfare assistance was denied.

One particularly disheartening case involved a 1st-year student who faced segregation due to her family's financial inability to pay fees. She lacked access to basic resources such as lockers, journals, and other materials, making her school experience notably more difficult.

Language barriers continue to hinder communication between schools and parents, often resulting in missed opportunities for support or crucial information. The centre manager mentioned instances where her outreach to schools for assistance went unanswered, leaving families unsupported. The centre manager claimed instances of racism have also been reported, with enquiries about children's nationality being raised during attempts to secure school placements.

5- What challenges have you faced compared to your homeland?

Families from a range of backgrounds shared their experiences, highlighting both challenges they have faced and areas where they believe the Irish education system offers improvements compared to their home countries.

Urdu-speaking families emphasised logistical issues that were unfamiliar to them. One family highlighted the difficulty of walking long distances to school due to the lack of transportation, a challenge they had not encountered in their home country. Another family raised concerns about transportation, the absence of adequate study spaces at home, and the fact that not all their children received the back-to-school allowance, which further compounded their difficulties.

Arabic-speaking families, on the other hand, pointed out that the education system in their home countries was considerably worse than the Irish system. These families recognised the positive aspects of the Irish system, which they believe better supports their children's growth and development.



Arabic-speaking families primarily use email to communicate with their child's school, and the school also communicates with them in the same way.

Spanish-speaking families typically communicate with the school via email, using translation apps to understand the content. Some families seek assistance from other parents or interpreters when needed. One family, who initially relied on support from a school liaison, gradually became more independent in managing communication as their understanding improved.

For English-speaking families, communication typically occurs through email or apps like "Aladin." However, some parents mentioned delays in responses from the school, which added to their frustration.

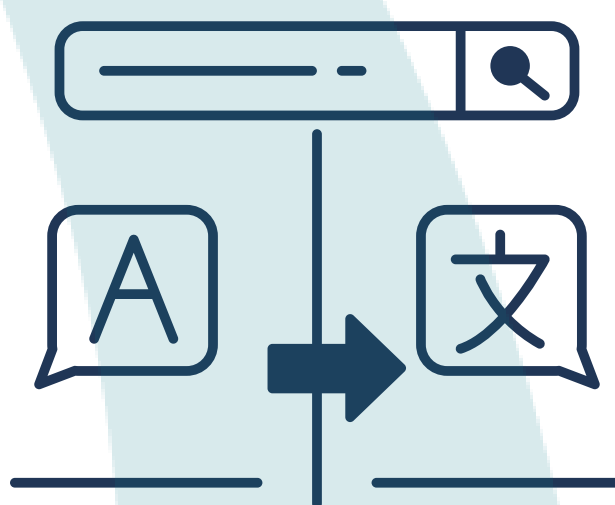
Finally, the centre manager explained that schools initially communicate with parents through her, as she serves as an intermediary. Some schools utilise the Aladdin app for communication, but the manager expressed uncertainty about whether parents use it effectively. The manager also noted that language barriers pose a challenge for direct communication between parents and schools, and as a result, important school notices may be missed due to difficulties understanding written communication in English.

7- Do you have any opportunity to sit on a parent association?

When asked about the opportunity to sit on a parent association, families shared a range of experiences, reflecting the varying degrees of involvement and accessibility.

Urdu-speaking families reported that they have not been involved in a parent association or given the opportunity to participate. Although they have attended parent meetings, they encountered challenges due to language barriers, which may have limited their ability to engage fully in these settings.

Arabic-speaking families noted that there are consistent opportunities to meet with staff members and other parents at school, though they did not specifically mention formal participation in a parent association.



Spanish-speaking families had differing experiences. The families were unfamiliar with the concept of a parent association but mentioned being part of a WhatsApp group for their children's class, which offered a different form of communication, suggesting that informal networks may be more common in their experience.

English-speaking families reported that some parents had been invited to join the Parent Association, but they had not yet participated due to timing or financial limitations. This indicates that while the opportunity exists, external factors such as scheduling conflicts or financial limitations may prevent full engagement.

The centre manager explained that, in general, parents do not typically have opportunities to sit on parent associations. Several factors contribute to this, including language barriers, lack of awareness, and cultural differences, which may prevent parents from becoming involved in these associations. This suggests a need for better support and accessibility to encourage greater participation among families from diverse backgrounds.

8- Have you attended any events in the school? Have you been invited to any?

When asked about attending or being invited to school events, families shared a range of experiences, highlighting both challenges and positive opportunities.

Urdu-speaking families reported mixed experiences. One family mentioned that they have not been invited to any school events, citing that the school is still under development, and has limited opportunities for participation. The other family, while receiving information about events via text messages, has not yet attended any, suggesting that logistical or other barriers have prevented their involvement.

English-speaking families noted being invited to various events, such as pizza nights or sports activities. However, attendance was often hindered by financial restrictions or other obligations, making it difficult for them to fully participate in these opportunities.



Arabic-speaking families mentioned that they have not yet had the chance to attend any school events, as it is still early in the term.

Spanish-speaking families shared more positive experiences. One family attended a children's concert at the school, describing it as a positive experience and appreciating the chance to participate. Another family attended events such as Christmas and Halloween celebrations, which were typically announced via email or WhatsApp, and they were always invited, indicating a more consistent level of engagement with school events.

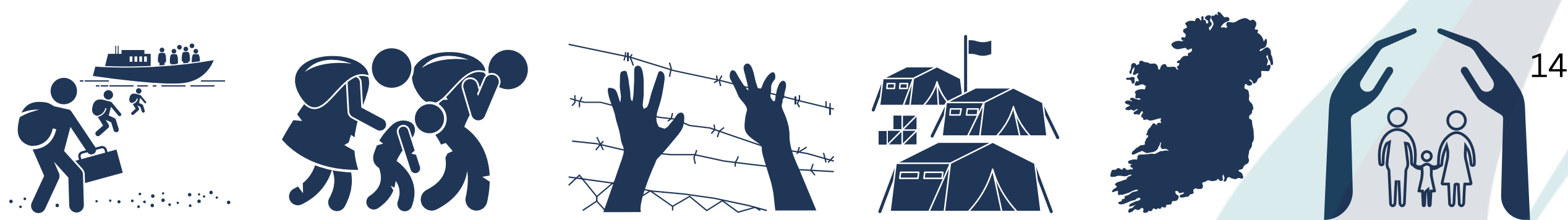
The centre manager explained that, in general, parents have limited knowledge about school events, and she herself is often not informed about them either. Although communication about events may be sent through school journals or letters, language barriers prevent many parents from fully understanding the information. The manager also expressed uncertainty about whether children might be excluded from social activities, such as birthday parties, due to cultural differences or potential discrimination. She advised the NPC team not to ask about social exclusion to avoid causing any upset among the families, further illustrating the challenges families face in accessing and engaging with school events.

9- What supports do you need? What might help you?

When asked about the support they need and what might help them, families highlighted a variety of challenges and potential solutions to improve their children's educational experience in Ireland.

Urdu-speaking families emphasised the need for reliable transportation to school for their children. They requested support to overcome the language barrier. One family specifically mentioned the need for a dedicated study room for their children to help them with their schoolwork, and they sought clarification regarding the back-to-school allowance issue, as only two of their children received it.

Arabic-speaking families indicated a strong need for financial assistance, particularly for the costs associated with uniforms, books, and laptops. This financial burden creates additional strain for these families, further complicating their ability to provide the necessary resources for their children's education.



Spanish-speaking families raised concerns about the lack of language support for their children. One family suggested that providing a laptop with translation software would greatly help their daughter communicate better and complete her schoolwork. Another family highlighted the need for better internet connectivity at home to support their children's English practice.

English-speaking families also expressed the need for financial support, particularly to cover the costs of extracurricular activities. They shared that financial strain is not only impacting their ability to engage in school activities but is also affecting their children's emotional well-being. The inability to fully participate in school life is a source of stress for both parents and children.

The centre manager identified several critical needs, with the most urgent being financial support for essential items such as uniforms, coats, shoes, and school supplies, especially for senior cycle students. The limited weekly social welfare support provided to asylum seekers makes it difficult for families to cover these basic costs. Furthermore, the manager highlighted the difficulty families face in funding school trips, which is an additional financial strain.

Another pressing issue was the lack of local school placements, which led to children being placed in schools far from their homes. This situation not only isolates children but also creates logistical challenges related to transportation. The manager emphasised the need for more inclusive school policies to ensure that all children can fully participate in school life.

Due to the absence of direct donations to the centre, the manager has had to rely on personal connections and charity organisations, such as St. Vincent De Paul and the Irish Refugee Council, to assist families with school fees.

There is also uncertainty regarding how future relocations of families may impact children's schooling, but this has not yet affected the centre.

Greater awareness and inclusivity from local schools would go a long way in helping bridge the gap between parents and children. The manager also stressed the need for better access to affordable technological resources, such as iPads or laptops, which would greatly support children's learning. Finally, improved government assistance for additional school costs beyond the basics is needed to ensure families can fully support their children's education.

Conclusion

This report highlights the experiences of families under international protection as they navigate the Irish education system, presenting a complex picture of successes, persistent challenges, and opportunities for meaningful improvement. The findings emphasise the need for an education system that is inclusive, accessible, and supportive, ensuring that the voices of parents and children are heard and valued.

By addressing barriers through greater equity, transparency, and collaboration, the Irish education system can foster a more welcoming environment for all stakeholders—families, schools, and communities. Strengthening these connections will empower families, promote integration, and ultimately enhance the educational experiences and outcomes for children under international protection.

