

International Schooling for Tomorrow Forum Forum international L'école de demain

June 6–8th, 2004

Toronto, Canada

6 au 8 juin 2004

ADDITIONAL COUNTRY PAPERS:
IRELAND



Supported by the Ontario Ministry of Education
Avec la participation du ministère de l'Éducation de l'Ontario



Schooling in the Republic of Ireland 2004 – policy context and reform agenda.

1. Introduction

While much of the analysis presented here is relevant to the education system before and beyond schooling, a particular focus is placed on those issues most pertinent to primary and post-primary schooling.

Four key features of the current policy landscape in education are outlined below:

- The strategic goals of the Department of Education and Science
- The partnership approach to policy-making
- Equality and Inclusion
- Building and leading the knowledge society

Where relevant, examples are given of recent or current responses to or attempts to address particular issues or concerns.

At the end of this note, an overview is presented of one major reform initiative that incorporated system-wide reflection and attempted to integrate foresight processes into the proposals for change and their implementation strategies.

2. The strategic goals of the Department of Education and Science

The Statement of Strategy 2003-2005 of the Department of Education and Science sets out the following mission statement:

The mission of the Department of Education and Science is to provide for high-quality education, which will:

- *Enable individuals to achieve their full potential and to participate fully as members of society, and*
- *Contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development.*¹

This mission reflects the dual goals that underpin most education policy debates and much of official policy discourse. While the goals are generally presented together and given equal weighting in policy rhetoric, in practice there can often be a tension between the two goals.

In support of this mission, the Department of Education and Science has undergone significant reform and restructuring, notably the establishment of a number of independent and/or statutory agencies to direct work in particular areas. Notable among these have been the Education Welfare Board and the Special Education Council.

In recent times, education in Ireland has seen the development of an extensive legislative framework, including the Education Act (1998), the Qualifications Education and Training Act (1999), the Education Welfare Act (2000), the Official Languages Act (2003) and the Education for Persons with Disability Bill (2003). Understanding the implications of these new legislative directives and learning how to interface with new agencies and organisations has added to the complexity of educational change for all the partners in education, and will continue to be a significant feature of Irish education for the short to medium term.

3. The partnership approach to policy-making

Ireland has an established tradition of partnership in policy-making for the social and economic arena. The policy-making approaches for education share a similar approach.

¹ www.education.ie

A good case-in-point is the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).² This statutory agency advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, and for primary and post-primary schools. It is constituted from representatives of teacher unions, school management organisations, parents' groups, industry and trade union interests. It operates on a consensus basis.

The review of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) – the first major review since 1971 - and its subsequent and ongoing introduction in primary schools is generally seen as a 'success story' for the partnership approach to policy making.³

However, given the increasing social and cultural diversity in Irish society, consensus has become more difficult to achieve. While those who are represented on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment may feel that they participate in the shaping of policies, those who are not represented feel themselves to be excluded. The contestation associated with curriculum has, in recent times, become more marked and more vociferous. The issue of language in the curriculum for schools, for example, has been relatively uncontested until recent times. English, Irish and another modern European language have been studied by the vast majority of students. Of late Arabic, Japanese, and Russian have been provided for and there are calls for additional languages to be offered, and for access to mother-tongue to be provided for children and students who have neither English nor Irish as their first language. The NCCA recently published a paper on this issue. Consensus on this issue will be difficult to achieve.

A recent initiative of the Minister for Education and Science entitled *Your Education System* involved the publication of a discussion paper on general issues in education and a series of open public meetings to discuss these and any other issues attendees wished to raise.⁴ Submissions were also sought on the key themes in the paper. This consultation process aims to inform the directions for education policy for the future. The introduction to the process sets the context.

² www.ncca.ie

³ for details of the curriculum, see www.ncca.ie, for details of its introduction to schools, see www.pcspp.ie

⁴ www.youreducation.ie

Society in Ireland has changed dramatically over the last number of years and this pace of change will accelerate. Schools as we know them today are unlikely to look the same in 10-20 years time. What is learned, how it is learned, the role of teachers, the role of schools and other educational institutions will be very different in the future. This process is about positioning ourselves so that the Irish education system develops to reflect societal change. It is about maintaining and enhancing our international competitiveness. It is about ensuring that our education system acts as agent of social cohesion.

The themes covered in the discussion paper include:

- The role of the school in the future
- The learning process and how it will change in the future
- ICT and its impact on learning
- Examinations/qualifications
- The role of teachers and other education professionals
- The issue of quality and parents information requirements
- The role of further and higher education into the future
- The need to maintain competitiveness into the future
- The social inclusion agenda
- The issue of funding
- The role of communities and their connectivity with education into the future

The Your Education System initiative is continuing.

4. Equality and Inclusion

The economic development of Ireland during the late 1990s and into the new century has surpassed all expectations, and has given rise to a heightened awareness of the pivotal role education plays in increasing prosperity, and the responsibility education has in promoting social inclusion. While the economic boom enriched educational opportunities for many there still remains inequality of access, participation and outcome for many students. Barriers arising from difference in socio-economic status,

ethnicity, disability, and gender all serve to hinder the development of a fully inclusive and cohesive society.

While these issues have received considerable attention in discussions relating to access to and experiences of tertiary education in Ireland in recent times, they are an ongoing feature of policy debates about early childhood, primary and post-primary education. There is an increasing awareness that as Ireland develops further as an information society and a knowledge-based economy, the role played by education in laying the foundations and providing the conditions for lifelong learning and for social and civic participation is critical. Debates on these issues as they relate to schooling are giving increasing emphasis to equality of outcome as well as equality of access. While equality and inclusion issues have been recurring themes in Irish educational policy discourse, the increasing cultural and ethnic diversity of the school-going population has added a new strand to the debate.

Recent initiatives to promote greater equity and cohesion in education have placed increasing emphasis on the empowerment and capacity-building in schools. School Development Planning⁵ for example, supports schools in self-evaluating across a range of headings and in the design and delivery of appropriate responses.

The traditional 'special programme' based response is giving way to a greater emphasis on the integration of services and the schools being the fulcrum of this activity.

5. Building and Leading the Knowledge Society

Ireland is acutely conscious of the emerging dynamics of the knowledge society. As a country highly dependent on inward foreign investment, its people are its greatest resource, and an educated, learning-friendly and highly skilled population is central to economic strategy and planning.

⁵ for information on school development planning in primary schools see www.sdps.ie, for post-primary, www.sdpi.ie

In keeping pace with these developments, schools in the 21st century are challenged to enable their learners to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they will need to become lifelong learners in the knowledge society. The quality and relevance of the learning experience schools provide will increasingly depend on the extent to which they prepare learners to manage the demands of modern society successfully.

Partnerships between teachers, parents, students, and school management will be central to the evolving culture of schools which meet the needs of learners in the knowledge society. In so doing, these learning organisations of the future may bear only passing resemblance to the schools of the past. (NCCA, Strategic Plan 2003-2006)

The on-going development of the National Framework of Qualifications⁶ and the ensuing greater awareness of access and progression for all learners has been, and will continue to be, significant in the overall support for the agenda of lifelong learning.

The demands and pressures on schooling in this context are significant. The dynamics of the reform process are demanding, and often conflicting. A call for greater flexibility for learners to allow for more individualised learning paths, especially for students in the post-primary education is matched by calls for more students to study physical sciences and for greater time to be allocated to mathematics. The demand to ensure that the system can meet the needs of all learners, is accompanied by a warning that high standards must be maintained.

While these, sometimes contradictory, demands ensure that the process of education reform remains contested, there is broad agreement that greater accountability is needed across all sectors of the education system. There is little agreement however, as to the shape and degree of that accountability.

⁶ www.nqai.ie

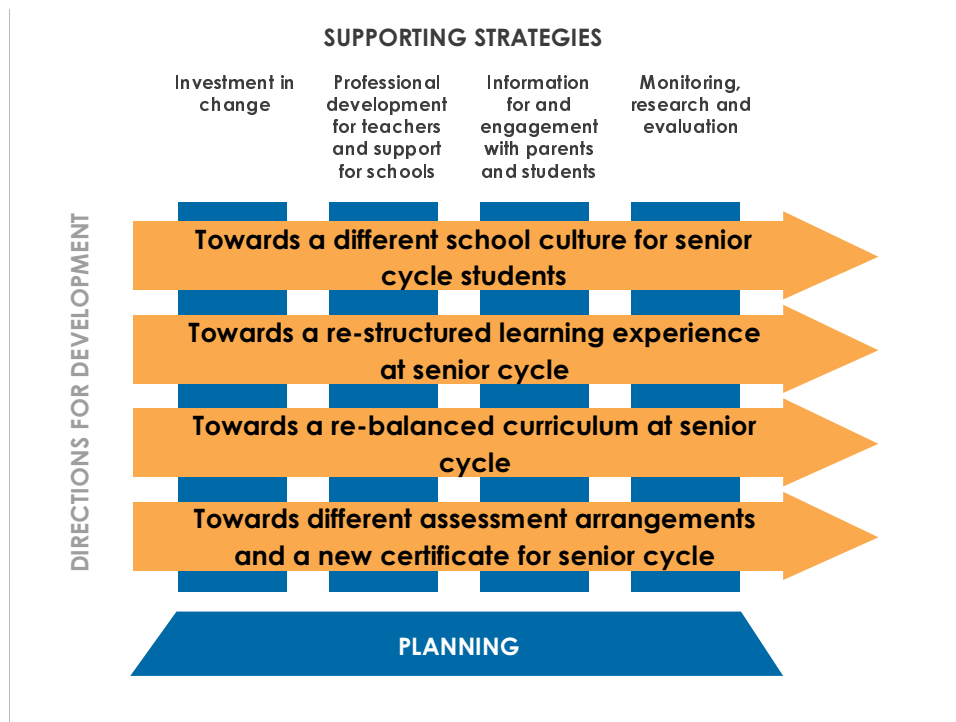
6. Looking to the future – the case of the reform of senior cycle education

A short summary of the process of drawing up the reform proposals by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is presented here. More details of the proposals, the scenario used and all the supporting documentation are available at www.ncca.ie. The preparation of these proposals used the ‘Toolbox’ and made explicit reference to the Schooling for Tomorrow project in its documentation. In moving from a consultative phase on the challenges facing senior cycle education (generally those sketched in the overview of policy presented earlier in this note) to a set of proposals, a scenario approach was taken which presented a vision of senior cycle education in Ireland in 2010.

This ‘future scenario’ was constructed using a number of sources including;

- A comparative study of upper secondary education across systems
- A major discussion paper on senior cycle education and the options for its development
- An online survey (which attracted considerable interest and comment
- Structured bilateral meetings with key agencies and organisations in education, industrial policy and further and higher education
- Engagement with groups and networks not generally included in traditional ‘partnership’ dialogue in education
- The Schooling for Tomorrow Toolbox

The scenario, presented in a booklet called ‘Directions for Development’ was launched at a Forum on Senior Cycle Education in Autumn 2003. The scenario for 2010 was presented and used as the basis for discussion. The scenario was ‘mapped’ using a set of ‘directions’ connected in the matrix below.



The use of a scenario and of a general ‘futures’ approach was well received. It allowed for engagement with medium and long-term issues and forced the debate beyond the urgent and the proximate. Some of the more complex policy themes of Irish education were addressed through the scenario approach which allowed for the practical implications of decisions and priorities to be projected into the day-to-day experiences of schooling for 16-18 year olds.

Those working within education welcomed the fact that the scenario presented called for system-wide integrated innovation. Considerable disquiet had been expressed in the consultation process and bilateral meetings at the perceived overload experienced by schools faced with multiple initiatives with little apparent connection. The scenario was premised on a range of linked innovations as presented in the matrix above. Those working outside education also welcomed this approach; they also focused on the long-term horizon within which the change was planned and the fact that further engagement in foresight was integrated into the scenario and its supporting strategies.

Although a more formal evaluation of the consultation process based on the 'Directions for Development' has yet to take place, the NCCA who sponsored the consultation is pleased that it allowed for school communities – parents, teachers, students and management – to engage with potentially complex issues in an accessible format, and to actively participate in shaping the educational agenda.

In June 2004, based on extensive engagement with the scenario for 2010, the NCCA will present a set of proposals for the reform of senior cycle education. These proposals look to the medium and long-term and emphasise the need for ongoing monitoring to ensure that foresight continues to inform and shape developments to 2010 and beyond.