

**Address by the Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills, Ms. Mary Coughlan, T.D., at the launch of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment consultation process on the Junior Cycle**

**Clock Tower, Department of Education and Skills,  
Marlborough Street, Dublin**

**Wednesday, 21 April 2010**

*oOo*

**Introduction**

Good morning everyone. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to formally launch this important consultation process – seeking views on what the future shape of the post primary junior cycle should be.

I know the case for a junior cycle review was made before my arrival here in Marlborough Street, but the review is one that I am fully committed to and, indeed, excited about. The period of the junior cycle is such an important one in the formative years of our young people. The skills they learn and the outlook they develop during these key adolescent years will impact greatly on their individual futures. Their experiences will shape their life chances and leave them with the values which will underpin

their role as future citizens, future parents and future leaders. As a result, there is a huge onus, not only on parents, but on society to put the best possible supports in place at such a critical time for our young adults. That includes equipping them with the very best education that the State with its resources can provide; and it includes delivering that education through the framework of a best practice contemporary curriculum.

### **Why Change?**

Many will ask: “Why do we need to change? Don’t we have a strong track record with the Junior Certificate?” Well, yes we do. But the world around us continues to change at an ever increasing pace. The young adults of today will, when they become citizens of majority and part of our future labour force, be competing globally with other nations and peoples to attract high quality employment opportunities to these shores. We have an onus therefore to equip them with the skill sets necessary to compete at that level if their own futures are to be better than the generation that went before.

The quality and relevance of our education system is a central cornerstone for Ireland’s economic growth and competitiveness – a competitiveness which is essential if we are to fund core services like health and education and have a socially inclusive society.

Meeting our responsibilities in this regard involves continuous change and reform of our curriculum at all levels. While subjects have been updated on an ongoing basis, it is some time since there has been a fundamental review of the overall junior cycle. It was September 1989 when the Junior Certificate was introduced. The fact is that ongoing review must be part and parcel of an effective modern education system. Teaching methodology and best practice continues to evolve as we learn more about how we learn best. If many of us here, of a certain age, were to return to the classroom as students today, the teaching methods we would experience are a world away from what we knew a generation or two ago.

For example, last year was the tenth anniversary of the launch of the revised primary curriculum. It is a curriculum that is now well established and has been subject to ongoing evaluation. While there are issues to address around curriculum overload and improved assessment, the primary curriculum is widely regarded as having been extremely successful. It is clear that children now enjoy school much more than we, in our day, ever did. They have become active learners at that level, developing a spirit of enquiry and learning to work with others to solve problems. The successful development and implementation of this child-centred curriculum at primary level must now be

mirrored in the development of a young-adult-centred curriculum for the post primary junior cycle.

### **Type of Change**

To date at post primary level, the principal focus of recent reform has been on senior cycle. The junior cycle is however a key pathway through adolescence, and a foundation for lifelong learning. Junior cycle offers the opportunity to provide a continuum from primary level, and a platform for active learning and development of key skills. It needs to provide a broad and flexible base which equips students for a variety of options in senior cycle, while catering for the needs of an increasingly diverse population. It also needs to provide an appropriate level of challenge to high achievers while successfully engaging and addressing the needs of all learners, including those with special needs.

Our learners need to be flexible, adaptable, resilient and competent if they are to participate successfully in society and be enabled as independent learners throughout the whole of their lives. They need to develop critical thinking skills and move away from the trend towards rote learning. Curriculum reform must result in a more active learning experience for the individual, promote a real understanding within learning, and aim to embed a seed of creativity and innovation in the learner.

## **Issues to Address**

I congratulate the NCCA for their work to date in laying the key foundations for an informed review of junior cycle, both in looking at international practice, and at in-depth research through the ESRI longitudinal study. That study tracked some 900 learners in 12 case study schools as they moved from primary level through second level. They are now being tracked into further and higher education. This study, for the first time, provides a very clear student perspective, as well as key findings on class grouping, subject and programme choice, and performance in standardised testing and in examinations. It also provides information on what students like, what they see as good teaching, how they integrate into the social environment in school, their relationships with teachers and peers, and their overall attitudes to schooling as they move through the system.

While the findings are very positive, there are some aspects which give cause for concern – concerns that must be comprehensively considered during the course of this review. The study highlighted significant levels of stress with students pressured by taking 10-14 subjects in junior cycle. It also showed that a significant minority were experiencing disengagement and dissatisfaction with their school experience.

A striking theme that emerges from the study is one of curriculum discontinuity: students in first year spoke of the challenge of new subjects and the frustration of repeating much of what they had already learned in primary schools in other subjects. Over time a minority of students became increasingly disengaged, and were more likely to express negative attitudes to school. This was strongly associated with gender, social background and being in a lower ability group.

For third year students, their experience is dominated by an examination which is of diminishing importance. The report indicates that the Junior Certificate examination is overly influenced by written terminal assessment and has a significant negative backwash on what is taught and on how students learn.

### **Curriculum Overload**

Curriculum overload is an important area for attention. We are doing our students no favours if the curriculum cannot be implemented in the time available. It is important to ensure that the time is available for active learning methodologies to be used in the classroom and for key skills to be embedded across the curriculum. Rigorous prioritisation of curriculum objectives and a focus on what is realistically achievable in the classroom is an important part of this review.

Developing key skills, and equipping our students with the core capacity to learn to learn is vitally important and needs time and space in school. There must be an appropriate balance between necessary content and knowledge, and skills development.

### **Assessment**

There are constraints inherent in a centralised system of externally set and externally marked examinations, and the scope for further reform in senior cycle will rest heavily on some decrease being made in the scale and volume of centralised assessment at junior cycle. This is not a matter of funding, but that further complexity and volume within the constraints of a limited timeframe increase the risk of system failure.

Ireland is unusual in international terms in having a centralised assessment model within lower second level education, in what is no longer a high stakes environment. The international trend is to have externally set and marked examinations in high stakes environments, and we are committed to maintaining this in the Leaving Certificate.

Assessment is an integral part of the learning process and we need to make sure that there are robust and appropriate processes for gathering evidence of learning, for ensuring that

students are motivated and work to achieve key goals, that they experience success in learning, and are given appropriate recognition for it. However, the approach must not stifle learning and innovation, or reward recall at the expense of real understanding.

### **Lifeskills and Entrepreneurial Culture**

A true education is about more than just the academic.

Lifeskills are critically important as students negotiate their way through adolescence and the competing pressures of modern society. Social, personal and health education is an important aspect of the work of schools. However, feedback for evaluations at second level indicate that while the curriculum is in line with best international practice, implementation is not consistent in schools. The Government is acutely conscious of the challenges we face in tackling alcohol and drug abuse and in promoting responsible decision making in regard to relationships and sexuality. We need to promote healthy lifestyles through proper nutrition and exercise, thus tackling obesity and promoting the confidence and resilience in young people which will help reduce the risk of mental illness and suicide.

The Report of the Innovation Task Force, the work of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, and the Government strategy

“Building Ireland’s Smart Economy” all place key emphasis on the promotion of entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation. Given my own previous portfolio, I particularly appreciate the importance of fostering a ‘can-do’ attitude and a healthy entrepreneurial culture across Ireland. There is much international evidence that creativity and innovation is best built on making space for bottom up development in schools, and the integration of skills into subjects, not as an add on. The junior cycle presents an opportunity to build on the success of Transition Year and make space for creative learning and wider skills development. The question is how much space should there be, and how can we do this in a way which ensures that national standards are maintained and all students have an appropriate and consistent preparation for study in senior cycle?

### **Importance of a Qualification**

I can recall the newspaper headlines earlier this year “*Junior Cert to be abolished.*” I want to make it clear that while a changed model is needed, what is envisaged is that we will have a qualification, designed for all, built on evidence of learning, mechanisms for ensuring national standards, and a means of ensuring that students are well equipped for the demands of senior cycle. It is also important to remember that, regrettably, almost 9,000 young adults still choose to leave the education

system each year without completing senior cycle. We do not want them leaving without a qualification.

Our education system is widely respected and valued, but there are ever changing demands and rising skill needs in the knowledge society. We must gear up and prepare students for the future, for adaptability, resilience, change and uncertainty. We must instil the values needed for a sustainable planet and a sustainable society. We can no longer assume students will have a single lifelong career. It is important to keep this in mind when framing a curriculum, so that the knowledge, skills and capacities which are promoted are those which will sustain students into the future, and into lifelong learning.

## **Conclusion**

The dialogue and consultation today and over the coming months will impact on all our futures – for teachers involved in change, for students in their learning, for parents, and for our success as a society. It is important therefore that reform is built on sound educational principles, informed by research and dialogue, and that it is well planned, appropriately supported, and promoted in an orderly manner with appropriate lead in notice. Change of any sort can be difficult. This is particularly so in relation to curriculum and our education system, where the stakes are so high and the consequences of failed or bad reform

can have a detrimental impact on our young. Well considered and successful change on the other hand can be rejuvenating.

I wish you well in your deliberations. I know that a range of bodies are already discussing the NCCA Discussion Paper, *Innovation and Identity: Ideas for a new Junior Cycle*, and will be inputting their views into the debate on an ongoing basis. The NCCA is also engaging with its school development networks on this issue, and will continue to consult industry and the partners in education as a key part of the process. This will culminate in a symposium in the autumn, presenting feedback and setting out proposals for the general direction of reform. I look forward to this, and I know that the best interests of students, and their futures, will be at the heart of your deliberations.

Go raibh maith agaibh