Senior Cycle Review

What is the purpose of senior cycle education in Ireland?

AN TSRAITH SHINSEARACH
SENIOR CYCLE

Foreword

Forty-one post-primary schools across Ireland embarked on an ambitious project in May 2018, to formulate and share their thinking with the NCCA and the country on the purpose of senior cycle education in Ireland. What follows is a snapshot of the rich tapestry of thoughts and ideas which emerged from teachers, students and parents as they discussed the purpose of senior cycle education in Ireland, explored students' current experiences and began to suggest future directions senior cycle education might take. We also invite you to read the ESRI's full report, *Senior Cycle Review: Analysis of Discussions with Schools on the Purpose of Senior Cycle Education* which is available at **ncca.ie/seniorcycle**.

The conversation is open, the review continues, and ideas are still emerging. All review materials are available online for optional wider involvement of schools. If you would like to join the conversation, please make your voice heard by emailing us your thoughts on the purpose of senior cycle education in Ireland at **seniorcycle@ncca.ie**.

Why review senior cycle education?

At the foundation of the state in 1922, Ireland's post-primary landscape consisted of 278 secondary schools, 64 technical schools, 52 industrial schools and 4 reformatories. Just 745 boys and 250 girls completed their senior cycle education by sitting Leaving Certificate examinations. Ireland's commitment to education for all, up to and into adulthood, led to significant shifts in the coming decades. The Vocational Education Act in 1930 and the introduction of free post-primary education in 1966 opened up spaces and opportunities once only available to a tiny minority of young people. The numbers completing senior cycle education increased dramatically and the options open to our young people evolved. Where once less than a thousand young adults completed senior cycle, now 56,000 students complete senior cycle education every year.

As we approach the centenary of the foundation of the state, now is a good time to ask what experiences, opportunities and qualifications our young people need to carry forward with them into adulthood so they can continue to learn, work, grow and develop as human beings; learners; employers and employees; citizens; and future leaders in our communities.

And so, in a joint venture with schools, the NCCA asked teachers, students and parents to share their perspectives on the purpose of senior cycle education in Ireland.

The brief bulletin you are now reading offers a snapshot of voices and views from Cycle 1 of Senior Cycle Review, responding to this question, affirming the best aspects of our current system and highlighting ongoing challenges. School discussions were supported by relevant research, including a desktop study *Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions: Overview Report*.

In Cycle 2 of this review, schools will explore the pathways available to students and what flexibility the system offers, or needs to offer, to support all students to fulfil their potential. A second bulletin will then be published. For now, however, this bulletin focuses exclusively on the diverse perspectives offered on the purpose of senior cycle education in Ireland.
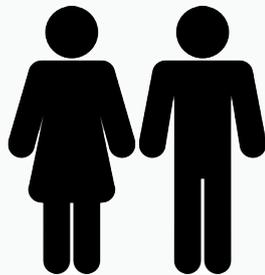
Who is taking part in Senior Cycle Review?

41 schools
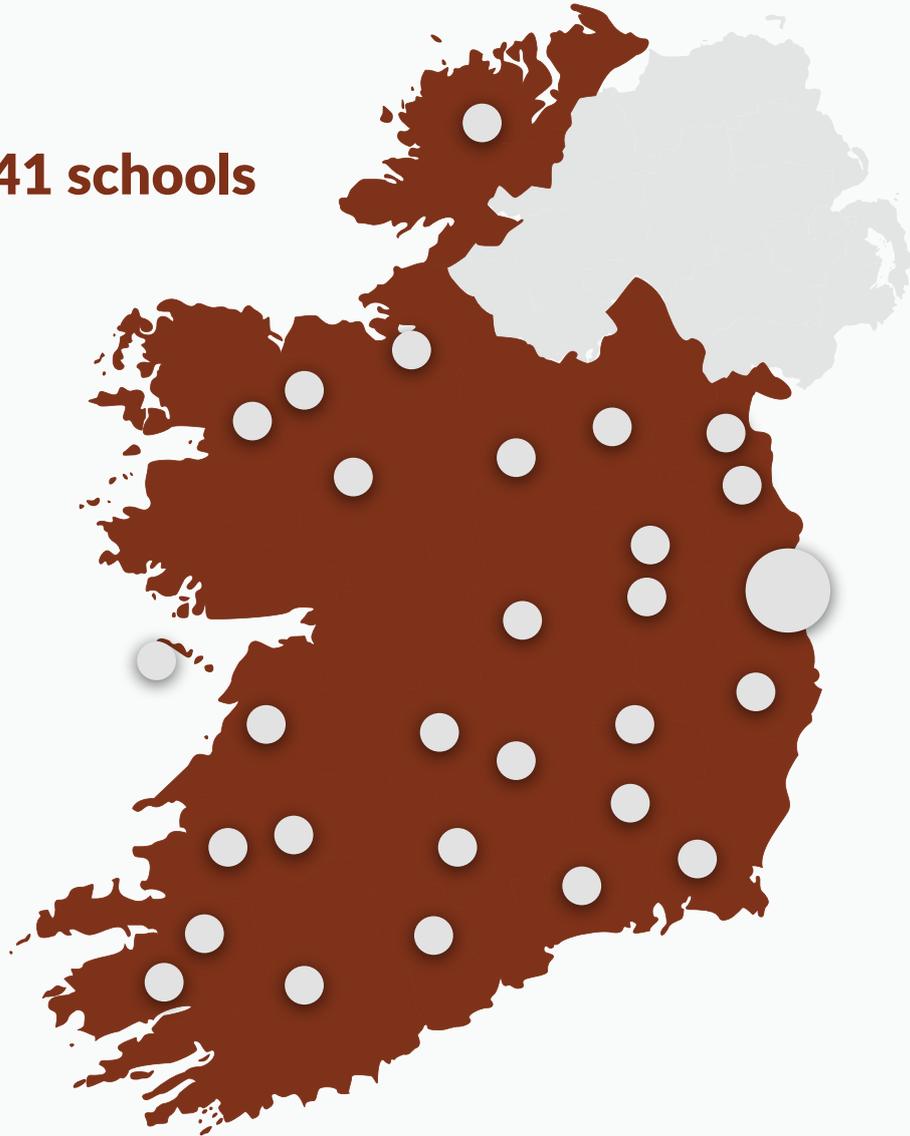
SCHOOL GENDER

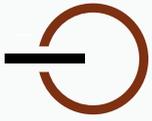|	
Female	**9**
Male	**7**
Mixed	**25**

TYPE OF SCHOOL

Secondary	**22**
ETB	**12**
Special School	**2**
C&C	**5**

DEIS **11**

Lán Ghaeilge **4**

What are teachers, students and parents talking about?

What are the best things about senior cycle?

How can all students achieve their full potential?

What do learners need from senior cycle to succeed in life?

Is senior cycle inclusive of all students?

What are the main challenges in senior cycle?

How should we define success in senior cycle?

Should senior cycle build on the new junior cycle?

What changes to senior cycle are needed?

What teaching and learning enables all to achieve their full potential?

What are we hearing?

Teachers, students and parents highlight many positive aspects of senior cycle, including:

- Opportunities for students to mature, develop personally and strengthen relationships with each other and with their teachers (this was frequently linked to experiences during transition year).
- The high quality of teaching staff, mature relationships with teachers and motivational teachers.
- Varied methods of assessment such as project work, portfolio-based work, opportunities for oral communication of learning and assessments which are less time-pressurised and spaced out across senior cycle.
- The objective, fair and highly-regarded nature of the current examination system.
- Varied teaching methods, including class discussions, peer learning, pair and group work.
- Career guidance.
- Work experience opportunities and links with the local community and businesses.
- An emphasis on pastoral care.
- Supports such as learning support, a focus on inclusion and mentoring.
- Positive school climate.
- Extra-curricular activities.

Inclusion and differentiation
- Varied teaching methods
- Variety of subjects
- Fairness and objectivity
- Varied methods of assessment
- Variety of programmes & pathways

Supports for students
- Mentoring and pastoral care
- Motivational teachers
- Mature relationships
- School climate

Preparation for life
- Community links
- Career guidance
- Work experience
- Extra-curricular activities

What are we hearing?

Teachers, students and parents also highlighted challenges in the current system, including:

- Lesser value placed upon vocational, practical and creative skills/subjects/programmes.

- Concern about students' wellbeing. The difficulty of trying to maintain personal interests, leisure activities, sports participation and part-time work was raised by parents. Students mentioned lack of free time for extra-curricular activities, social interactions and in some cases, sleep. Teachers highlighted the pressure across seven subjects and the impact on student wellbeing.

- Challenges relating to transition year, including financial barriers to participation; location barriers to participation (some schools don't offer TY) and difficulty regaining an academic focus after TY.

- Excessive workload and content-heavy curricula leading to time pressures.

- Excessive exam focus leading to stress and anxiety and in some cases lower motivation. Excessive media focus on examinations, and a lack of re-sits where a student is sick during exams.

- Points race related stress leading to poor subject, level and/or programme choices, not reflecting students' interests, abilities and/or aptitudes. Grinds culture giving an unfair advantage to families who can afford it and placing additional demands on students' already limited free time.

- Different value placed on Higher and Ordinary levels within the school culture and in the points system. Bonus points for mathematics giving rise to a range of challenges for teachers and students.

- Career guidance was viewed both as a positive and as a challenge in the system. It was suggested that more support may be needed; routes other than higher education should be emphasised; and students may be too young to make lifelong decisions.

- Focus on memorisation and under-emphasis on higher-order critical thinking skills. The backwash effect of the final examinations on teaching and learning was highlighted. Some concerns were expressed that exams come to be seen as a test of memory rather than intelligence.

- Parental and familial expectations and their impact on students, whether positive or negative, in terms of motivation and stress.

- Challenges with soft skills like motivation, responsibility, attendance, and independent learning.

- Currently there is no senior cycle programme following on from Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes for students with significant educational needs.

- Lack of access to higher education from the LCA programme and a stigma associated with the programme.

What is the purpose of senior cycle education?

Teachers, students and parents affirmed that senior cycle education, now and into the future, should provide opportunities and experiences which

Ask students to apply knowledge and develop skills

Teachers and parents emphasised higher-order questioning, critical thinking, problem solving, information processing, independent and collaborative learning and the importance of opportunities to apply their knowledge. Research, analytical, writing, communication, presentation and digital skills were all deemed significant. Creativity and innovation appeared, though less frequently.

Contribute to their personal development

Teachers, parents and students all emphasised the importance of developing soft skills such as resilience, respect for self, personal responsibility, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, self-acceptance and confidence, compassion, empathy, self-management and a love of learning. They also emphasised the importance of relationships and sexuality education. Developing the skills that are needed for life beyond school is deemed important in areas such as money management, cooking, DIY, driving, first aid and job interview skills.

Build towards diverse futures

Teachers, students and parents recognise that there are many pathways that students may take after school including higher and further education, apprenticeships, traineeships and employment or a combination of a number of these pathways. It was suggested that there is too much emphasis currently on transition to higher education and not enough emphasis and value placed on other pathways and lifelong learning.

Contribute to full citizenship and participation in society and the economy

Teachers, students and parents would like to see greater value placed on non-academic achievements such as effort and commitment, participation in school activities, community and volunteer work. Students would like to see a more holistic report of their achievements at the end of senior cycle. Teachers agreed to a point but had queries about how this might best be achieved.

Teachers, students and parents all suggested that the ultimate purpose of senior cycle education is to help every young adult to reach their full potential.
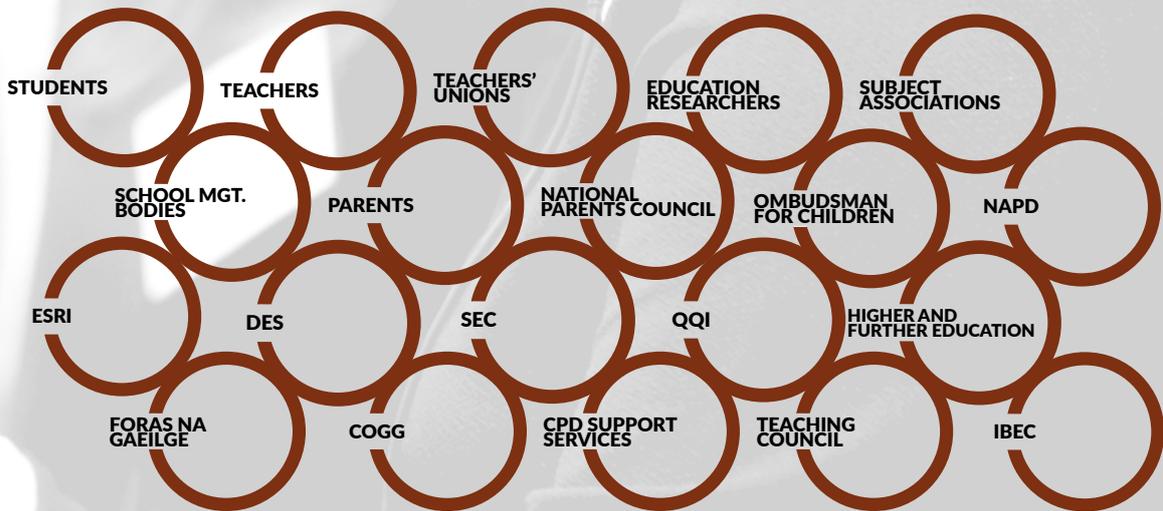
What talking points came up?

Rich discussions took place which generated interesting talking points, for example:

- Is the current system inclusive of all young adults, in particular young adults who wish to progress to the world of work and those with additional educational needs? Is it inclusive of students who have English as an additional language and students from minority backgrounds, such as Irish Travellers? Are students who experience educational and social disadvantage supported enough?

- As wider ways of displaying learning are encouraged, such as project work, group work and through the use of digital technologies, how can they be reliably assessed? Should a broader range of assessment methods complement rather than replace terminal examinations?

- Can a revised system recognise and value personal capabilities, community involvement and the life skills and capacities needed both within and beyond school? Can emphasis on and recognition of these capabilities extend beyond transition year into 5th and 6th year? And if so, how?

- How will the perceived lack of continuity between the revised junior cycle and the existing senior cycle impact on students? Should senior cycle build on changes to junior cycle or is it too soon to say? Teachers and students affirmed the use of a variety of teaching methods and assessment approaches and a range of views were expressed on how to broaden methods of assessment.

- Can we achieve parity of esteem and wider acceptance of student choices in terms of different programmes/pathways, subject choices and higher and ordinary levels?

- Is there a sufficient range and variety of subjects available? How many subjects should students study? Should all subjects be optional or should some be compulsory? Is subject relevance and applicability something which should be given greater consideration? Most students, parents and some schools suggested all subjects should be optional. Most students and some schools suggested that students should have the option to do fewer than seven subjects. Parents in many schools indicated a preference for a broad-based education but would like to see more emphasis on skills needed for adult life.

- Can mixed-ability teaching provide sufficient differentiation to meet the needs of all students?

- Will sufficient resources and CPD be available for schools enacting any proposed changes? What is the capacity for change in the system and what might the workload implications for students and teachers be?

The second cycle of the review, which focuses on pathways and flexibility in senior cycle education, will provide an opportunity to explore some of these questions in more detail.

Who attended the first cycle of national seminars?

STUDENTS

TEACHERS

TEACHERS' UNIONS

EDUCATION RESEARCHERS

SUBJECT ASSOCIATIONS

SCHOOL MGT. BODIES

PARENTS

NATIONAL PARENTS COUNCIL

OMBUDSMAN FOR CHILDREN

NAPD

ESRI

DES

SEC

QQI

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION

FORAS NA GAEILGE

COGG

CPD SUPPORT SERVICES

TEACHING COUNCIL

IBEC

National seminars

The NCCA held a series of national seminars in November 2018 in Dublin, Cork and Galway to give schools an opportunity to reflect on the main themes emerging and to open up the conversation to a broader audience. Speakers and panellists at these events included teachers, students and parents from participating schools; colleagues from the ESRI (Economic and Social Research Institute) outlining the main themes emerging from schools; the Ombudsman for Children; colleagues from third-level schools of education; and IBEC (Irish Business and Employers Confederation).

Attendees were invited to reflect on the seminar and, should they wish, to give feedback to the NCCA offering their perspectives on what the purpose of Senior Cycle should be. This invitation remains 'live' and can be taken up by emailing **seniorcycle@ncca.ie**.

If you would like to attend one of our seminars in February, email us at **seniorcycle@ncca.ie** and we will do our best to accommodate your request.
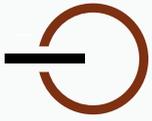
Next steps for Senior Cycle Review

Teacher, student and parent reports from 41 schools discussing the purpose of senior cycle education in Ireland were transferred to the ESRI (Economic and Social Research Institute) for analysis in October 2018. Following an intense period of analysis, synthesis and reflection, the ESRI published a working paper *Senior Cycle Review: Analysis of Discussions in Schools on the Purpose of Senior Cycle Education in Ireland*, which aims to capture the purpose of senior cycle education articulated by schools. The insights included above come from this document but to get the full picture, please access the ESRI's working paper at **ncca.ie/seniorcycle**.

Schools now turn their attention to pathways and flexibility in senior cycle education, exploring the extent to which the current system provides pathways for all and offers flexibility in terms of where, how, when and what students learn. National seminars, in Limerick, Waterford, Athlone and Sligo, will follow cycle two of the review. A second working paper will be compiled by the ESRI and a bulletin, like this one, will summarise the main insights emerging from schools. Ultimately, an overview report making suggestions which address the main themes emerging from schools will be published for public consultation in the spring of 2019.

Have your say

The conversation is open, the review continues, and ideas are still emerging. If you would like to join the conversation, please make your voice heard by emailing us your thoughts on senior cycle education in Ireland at seniorcycle@ncca.ie. Research questions supporting teacher, student and parent discussions of senior cycle can be accessed at **ncca.ie/seniorcycle**.

Research supporting discussions of purpose in senior cycle includes

- *Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions: Overview Report (NCCA, 2018)*

- *Student Stress and the Leaving Certificate (ESRI, 2015)*

- *Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate (Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment 2014)*

- *Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century (2011)*

- *The Future of Education and Skills (Education 2030, OECD, 2018)*

- *Towards a Reskilling Revolution (World Economic Forum, 2018)*

- *Eight Futures of Work (World Economic Forum, 2018)*

This research can be accessed at **ncca.ie/seniorcycle**.

Notes

NCCA
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment