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Secondary Education in the Republic of Ireland

(Prepared by Áine Hyland, Education Department, University College, Cork for the Encyclopedia of Irish Culture - May 2001)

The second level education sector in the Republic of Ireland comprises (voluntary) secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. There are c. 370,000 students enrolled in second level education, attending a total of 768 publicly aided or provided schools. 445 of these are voluntary secondary schools; 246 are vocational schools and 77 are comprehensive or community schools. Voluntary secondary schools, which educate about 60% of second level students, are privately owned and managed, either by religious communities or by Boards of Governors or individuals. Over 95% of the cost of teachers' salaries in these schools are met by the State. In addition, allowances and capitation grants are paid to the schools which participate in the free education scheme (about 95% of secondary schools). The remaining 5% are fee-paying schools and while the salaries of teachers in these schools are paid by the State, the schools do not receive allowances or capitation grants.

Vocational education committees (locally elected) administer vocational schools, educating 26% of all second-level students. The remaining 14% of pupils are enrolled in Community and Comprehensive schools, which are fully funded by the state. Students normally remain in the same school for the five or six years of their second level schooling.

State support for second level education in the Republic amounts to over IR£1.2 billion per annum.

The secondary school system is effectively a separate and parallel Protestant and Catholic system. Of the 445 secondary schools, 22 are under Protestant management and 17 of these accept boarders. In addition to the Protestant secondary schools, there are five Protestant Comprehensive Schools. There is one secondary school under Jewish management and a very small number of non-denominational secondary schools. About 25 Catholic secondary schools accept boarders.

The secondary school programme is a two-cycle programme - the Junior cycle (for students aged 12 to 15) leads to the Junior Certificate, and the Senior cycle (a two or three years programme) leads to the Leaving Certificate. For the Junior Certificate examination, students typically take seven or eight subjects. All pupils sit an examination in Irish, English and Mathematics; the majority take History and Geography; a modern continental language, and science. There is a further range of over twenty subjects which pupils can opt to study – these include Music, Art, Technology, Business Studies, and many others.

On completion of the Junior Cycle, students may opt for a one year Transition Year programme, followed by a two year Leaving Certificate programme. (About 45% of students follow the Transition Year programme every year). There are three possible Leaving Certificate programmes - the (established) Leaving Certificate, taken by about 52,000 of the 64,000 Leaving Cert. students; the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, taken by about 10,000 students; and the Leaving Certificate Applied,

taken by over 2,000 students. Students taking the (established) Leaving Certificate choose six, seven or eight subjects from a total of 31 subjects. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, has a more vocational emphasis than the (established) Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme is pupil-centred and involves a cross curricular approach rather than a subject based structure.