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Post-primary Education in the Republic of Ireland

(Prepared by Áine Hyland for the Post Primary Review Body of Northern Ireland - Revised 26th Feb. 2001)

Executive Summary

The education system in the Republic of Ireland has traditionally been a centralised system with policy decisions taken either at central or school level. There are no intermediate structures between the Department of Education and Science and the schools, except in the case of the vocational sector. In general, the implementation of national educational policy is largely the responsibility of individual schools.

About 370,000[1] students are enrolled in post-primary education, attending a total of 768 publicly aided or provided schools. 445 of these are secondary (academic) schools; 246 are vocational schools:[2] and 77 are comprehensive or community schools. 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 are met by the State. In addition, allowances and capitation grants are paid to the 95% of secondary schools which participate in the free education scheme. 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.[3] Students normally remain in the same school for the five or six years of their second level schooling.

The estimated state support for second level education in the Republic amounted to £850m in 1995.

The 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 22 Protestant secondary schools, there are a small number of Protestant Comprehensive Schools - Newpark and Mount Temple on the south and north sides of Dublin respectively; Ashton in Cork; Raphoe in Co. Donegal and East Glendalough in Wicklow. At no stage was there any question of amalgamating Protestant and Catholic schools nor was there any demand from parents for religiously mixed (i.e. integrated schools) at post-primary level, although there was such a demand at primary level[4].

Of the c. 420 Catholic secondary schools, about 5% are fee-paying. The remaining 95% do not charge tuition fees. About 50 Catholic secondary schools accept boarders but this number has been falling steadily in recent years. This is largely because of the decrease in the numbers of religious Brothers and nuns and priest who in the past were available to carry out supervisory duties in boarding schools, at little or no cost to the religious community which ran the school.

Official policy in the Republic of Ireland from the early 1960s onwards, favoured a comprehensive approach to post-primary education. This comprehensive approach was variously described as "a comprehensive system" (Minister Hillery 1963); "an integrated system (Minister Colley 1966)[5]" the "comprehensive idea" (Minister Lenihan 1969) and "a unified system" (Minister Faulkner, 1970). However, successive governments adopted a gradualist policy to the realisation of the comprehensive objective. Schools in a town or suburb were encouraged to adopt their own strategies to deliver a comprehensive service for their catchment area. These strategies included sharing of facilities and

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[1] About 24,000 of these are post-Leaving Cert students, who in Northern Ireland would be classified as Further Education students.

[2] In some areas, vocational schools are referred to as Community Colleges.

[3] Dept. of Education, *Brief Description of the Irish Education System,* 1996.

[4] Since 1978, a total of 19 multi-denominational or *Educate Together* primary schools have been sanctioned by the Dept. of Education, catering for almost 4,000 pupils.

[5] The word "integrated" as used in this context does not have the same connotation as "an integrated school" in Northern Ireland.

teachers; common enrolment and rationalisation and amalgamation. From the early 1970s onwards, the government was pro-active in bringing about comprehensive provision only when financial investment was sought for the replacement, or the enlargement or improvement, of an existing post-primary building or when a new post-primary school was required in a newly developing "green-field" area. An application for grant-aid by the management authorities of a school usually led to a re-evaluation of post-primary provision in an area. From the 1970s onwards the community school became the preferred model for new schools, but this did not always prove feasible and there have been many cases in the past three decades, where despite government policy in favour of comprehensivisation, existing secondary schools successfully negotiated funding for a replacement building.

Over the past 35 years, post-primary provision has developed in various ways in different areas. Some towns still have the traditional pattern of three or four separate schools - a Catholic boys' secondary school; a Catholic girls' secondary school; a vocational school and a co-educational Protestant secondary school. Other towns might be served by a large community school. Yet other areas might have a combination of these - perhaps a community school sitting cheek by jowl with a girls' secondary school. Almost any combination of school types is possible.

In relation to selection, the State frowned on selection on academic or ability grounds since the late 1960s. The abolition of the Primary Cert. and of the County Council Scholarship examinations in 1967 was an indication of this official position. However, the State did not outlaw selective entrance examinations nor did it issue any official circulars forbidding secondary schools to use such examinations to select pupils until 1993. This was, in part, due to the fact that it was (and continues to be) unclear as to where the power of the State begins and ends in relation to privately owned (albeit publicly funded) secondary schools. In addition, the delicacy of the negotiations between the State and the Churches in relation to issues of governance and management of the new comprehensive and community schools contributed to State reluctance to enter into confrontation with school management authorities on the more general issue of school enrolment policy.

As might be expected, parents generally choose the most "prestigious" school (whether for social or academic reasons) for their children. Inevitably, when demand exceeds supply, schools must adopt some system of selection. However, selection in the Republic of Ireland from the 1960s to the early 1990s tended to be covert and it was difficult to find out precisely how such selection operated. In theory, entrance examinations for selection purposes have been forbidden by the Department of Education and Science since 1993, but there is no close monitoring of this regulation. In some areas, post-primary schools have come to an arrangement with primary schools in their catchment area and the teachers and principals of the primary schools act as a guide or a "filter", channeling their pupils into the different schools. In other areas, a "first-come" "first-served" or waiting list system operates - but the interpretation of such a system varies from area to area. Most schools give preference to siblings and sometimes to children whose parents attended that school. Other schools adopt a catchment area system. Since 1993, schools are required to disclose their enrolment policies and the criteria used in selecting pupils for enrolment.

When numbers begin to fall in an area, the least prestigious schools are first to suffer. Throughout the country, there has been a general pattern of vocational schools being the first to lose pupils, and many of these have made up the shortfall by introducing vocationally oriented post-Leaving Cert courses and adult education "back-to-school" courses. With the dramatic fall in births during the 1980s and 1990s (from 75,000 to 48,000 births per annum), demand for post-primary places started to decrease in the late 1990s and has had a serious effect on schools in some areas. Although the birth-rate has begin to rise again, the effects of the falling birth-rate in the 1980s and 1990s will continue to affect post-primary enrolments for many years to come. The government has set up a Commission on School Accommodation to monitor the situation and to advise the Department of Education and Science on best policy and practice.

Post-Primary Education in the South - The Historical Context

Pre-1922

Before 1922, a common system of post-primary education existed throughout the island of Ireland. Academic secondary education was provided in Intermediate schools, the owners of which could, if they so wished, enter their pupils for public examinations which were administered by the Board of Intermediate Education in Ireland. This Board had been set up under the 1878 Intermediate Education Act and it paid grants to schools based on the results of their pupils in these examinations. The schools were privately owned, denominational, and fee-paying. By 1922, the proportion of the population who enrolled in Intermediate schools was still very small (less than 10%) and only about 10% of these completed the Senior Grade examination. The curriculum of intermediate schools was based on the classical / humanist tradition although some efforts were made to 'modernise' it in 1900 by placing more emphasis on subjects such as science and mathematics.

Technical education was provided in technical schools, which were financially supported by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, which had been set up in 1899. There were very few full-time pupils in technical schools - most students attended on a part-time or block release basis.

1922 - 1960s

After 1922, the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland went their separate ways as far as post-primary education was concerned. In the south, the structure of the system remained largely unchanged initially, but there were considerable changes in the curriculum, with an emphasis on Irish language, history and culture, and in the method of allocating grant-aid to the schools. The title "intermediate" schools was dropped and the (academic) schools became known as "secondary" schools. Payment by results was abolished and a system of teachers' salaries and capitation grants to schools was introduced. A new national examination system - the Intermediate and the Leaving Certificate - was introduced in 1924 and remained in existence until the beginning of the 1990s.

In 1930, the Vocational Education Act was passed and Vocational Education Committees were set up in each county and county borough to set up and administer a network of vocational schools. Between 1930 and the 1960s there was a steady growth in the number of vocational schools, which provided a two year "continuation" (vocationally oriented) course for pupils aged 14 to 16. In 1947, a national examination for pupils in Vocational schools was introduced (the Day Group Certificate Examination) and this examination remained in existence until the beginning of the 1990s. During the same period, the number of secondary schools also increased and the numbers of pupils attending secondary schools more than doubled between 1922 and the early 1960s.

From 1930 until the 1960s, the post-primary system was a binary one - pupils had a choice of attending either a secondary (academic) school or a vocational school. Since secondary schools were fee-paying, and vocational schools charged only a nominal fee, the system developed more as a socially selective system rather than an academically selective one. However, all pupils entering either a Secondary or a Vocational school, were required to pass the Primary Certificate examination or an entrance examination set by individual schools. The Primary Certificate had been introduced in 1929 as an optional national examination for pupils in sixth class of the national (primary) school (about 12 years of age) and became compulsory in 1943. It was dropped in 1967 when free post-primary education was introduced.

The 1937 Constitution and Education

The 1937 Constitution strengthened the "voluntary" nature of the Irish education system and ensured that the role of the State in education would continue to be one of subsidiarity rather than of direct intervention. The Irish Constitution (1937) 'recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.[6]' Article 42 states that "The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children". It also asserts that "The State shall not oblige parents

[6] Article 41 of the Irish Constitution, quoted in J.M. Kelly *The Irish Constitution* (3rd.edition) Dublin and London: Butterworths, 1994.

in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State". Article 42.4 adds: "The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation".

These articles of the Constitution have been interpreted as permitting the State to provide financial assistance to schools which are privately owned and controlled, while not requiring the State to make direct provision for education at any level. In practice, this has resulted in a situation in Ireland where virtually all primary and most post-primary schools are owned and controlled by the Churches or by corporate bodies, and funded (over 90% of their cost) by the State. The subsidiary role of the State in educational matters, especially during the period 1930 to the 1960s, is best exemplified by the statement of a Minister for Education, Richard Mulcahy, in the 1950s, who saw his role as "a kind of dungarees man" who "will take the knock out of the pipes and will link up everything". When the *Investment in Education* team reported in 1965, it stated that

> Until recent years, the Minister for Education did not assume any direct responsibility for providing (post-primary) facilities. His function was interpreted as being rather to assist private enterprise and local bodies to provide such facilities as they deemed appropriate and practicable. In consequence, the existing pattern of facilities is rather diverse ..."

1960s to the 1990s

The 1960s heralded major changes in education in the Republic of Ireland, especially at post-primary level. In the mid 1960s, there were significant variations in the pattern of attendance at post-primary schools on geographical, socio-economic and gender grounds. About a third of each age cohort did not transfer to post-primary education and only 44% successfully completed junior cycle education. Scarcity of post-primary schools in some areas, lack of transport and the fact that secondary schools were all fee-paying, contributed to the low enrolment rate in post-primary education.

1963: Dr. Hillery's announcement regarding comprehensive schools.

In 1963, the then Minister for Education, Dr. P. Hillery, issued a major policy statement in which he indicated the future direction of educational change. Since this policy statement has continued to underpin the development of post-primary education in the south to the present day, it is worth focusing on its key aspects. Minister Hillery stated that the government intended to set up comprehensive schools; to extend the two year course in vocational schools and to allow pupils in vocational schools to sit the Intermediate Certificate Examination. The Intermediate Examination, which he envisaged would be a broader one than that then in existence, would cater "for the distinctive character and function of the secondary and vocational schools". He was of the opinion that "the great advantage of a common examination would be to give parity of standard to the courses in the two types of school." He made it clear that the government was in favour of a comprehensive approach to post-primary education and referred to "the ill effect which arises from the secondary schools and the vocational schools operating in watertight compartments". He also indicated that he proposed to introduce a Technical Leaving Certificate and to set up Regional Technical Colleges. Apart from the specific proposals it contained, the general tenor of Hillery's statement was unprecedented - the Dublin government would in future be pro-active in the provision of post-primary schools in the south.

1965: Investment in Education Report

Two years later, in 1965, the *Investment in Education* report included an in-depth analysis of post-primary provision on an area by area basis throughout the country. It identified major shortfalls in post-primary provision and recognised that significant investment would have to be made by government in providing facilities even for 12 to 15 year olds, not to mention 16 to 18 year olds. Recognising the complexity and diversity of the situation, the report suggested that ***"it might be useful to adopt solutions which make the maximum use of existing facilities rather than seek to impose a uniform pattern on all areas"***(my italics). This was effectively the approach taken by successive governments in the following 35 years and remains largely the policy in the south to the present day.

1966: Minister Colley's "integrated System of Post-primary Education"

In January 1966, Minister George Colley, wrote to all post-primary schools stating that "it seems to me that we are now at a stage when the future policy of my Department should be outlined to all concerned in the provision of post-primary education". He stated:

> There are two good reasons, at least, for urging that the barriers between the systems be broken down; first, the denial of a suitable education tends towards frustration in the pupil; second, our national survival demands the full use of all the talents of our citizens.

He then went on to spell out his proposal:

> While the time has come when the operation of two rigidly separated post-primary systems can no longer be maintained, this is not to say that the Secondary or the Vocational school need lose its distinctive character. What I have in mind is that there should be a pooling of forces so that the shortcomings of one will be met from the resources of the other, thus making available to the student in either school the post-primary education best suited to him.

Speaking about the three new comprehensive schools which were in the course of construction in Cootehill, Carraroe and Shannon, Minister Colley stated:

> Apart from their local importance, these schools are of general significance ***because they will signpost the way to an integrated post-primary system of education.*** (my italics). Let me add that I do not anticipate that the number of public comprehensive schools will be very great. My aim is that Secondary and Vocational schools, by the exchange of facilities and by other forms of collaboration, should make available a curriculum broad enough to serve the individual needs of all their students, and thereby ***to provide the basis of a comprehensive system in each locality*** (my italics).

1966 - Minister O'Malley's announcement of free Post-primary Education

It is of interest to note that neither Minister Hillery nor Minister Colley nor indeed the *Investment in Education* report had suggested that fees be abolished in secondary schools. The Minister who made that important announcement and heralded the introduction of free post-primary education in the south was Donagh O'Malley. In a speech in September 1996, he castigated a system where "some 17,000 of our children finishing their primary school course do not receive any further education". This amounted to "almost one in three of our future citizens". He announced that he was drawing up a scheme "under which in future no boy or girl in this state will be deprived of full equal opportunity - from primary to university level - by reason of the fact that the parents cannot afford to pay for it…".

Within a year, he delivered on this commitment. Fees in Vocational schools were abolished. Secondary schools were invited to "opt into the free scheme" and in return, they would be given an additional "grant in lieu of fees". Free transport was introduced for all pupils who lived three miles or more from their nearest post-primary school. Following intense negotiation, the majority of Catholic Secondary schools opted into the so-called "Free Scheme." [7] The additional grant in lieu of fees - initially a maximum of £25 per pupil - was less than the fees charged by any of the Protestant schools. Therefore a special scheme of means-tested grants was devised for pupils attending schools under Protestant management. In practice, the Department gave a block grant - roughly equivalent to the per capita grant of £25 multiplied by the numbers of Protestant pupils - to a newly formed committee (the Protestant Secondary Schools Grants Committee - PSSGC). This committee had responsibility for administering the fund to non-Catholic pupils who wished to attend post-primary schools under Protestant management. (These included not only Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and other Protestant pupils, but Jews, Moslems and others who were not Catholics). While the amount of the grant in lieu of fees and the block grant to the PSSGC has changed over the years, the basic principle underlying the funding and structuring of the post-primary education system has not.

Abolition of the Primary Certificate Examination - 1967/8

With the introduction of free post-primary education in 1967 came the abolition of the Primary Certificate examination and its use as a "gateway" to post-primary education. The Co. Council

[7] A small number - c. 6% - remained outside the scheme and continued to charge fees.

scholarship examinations were also abolished[8]. At a meeting between school management bodies, the I.N.T.O. and the Department of Education in June 1967, it was agreed that a School Record Card System would replace the Primary Certificate and this was notified to schools in October 1967. This School Record Card would "chronicle each pupil's background and attainments in the 5th and 6th standards of the primary school" and "on completion of the primary education courses by the pupil, the Record Card should be sent to the head of the post-primary school to which the pupil has transferred". In March 1998, details of the new system were circulated to managers and principal teachers of all National Schools.

The school Record Card, which (in theory) continues in use to the present day, is a very general one. In addition to recording personal and family details, it includes information on "Application, Interests, Health, Attendance and Attainments". In relation to the section on Attainments, the guidelines to principals which was sent out in 1968 stated that:

> The principal should, in cooperation with the class teacher, assess as accurately as possible through tests, written and oral, the attainment of each pupil in the various subjects. The standard reached by the pupil should be indicated by one of the following terms: *very good; good; fair; weak.* The Department relies on the teacher to give an impartial assessment in each case.

As might be expected, the vagueness and lack of definition of these terms (very good; good; fair; weak) and the variety of ways in which they are interpreted by different school principals, resulted in many complaints from post-primary schools over the years. Many post-primary schools ignored the Record Cards (if they ever received them) and introduced their own methods to assess the attainment of their incoming primary pupils. In practice, many post-primary schools required applicants to sit an entrance examination, which they then used either to select those who performed best and / or to stream the successful pupils into ability groups within the school.

1969 - "ALL OUR CHILDREN"- the Comprehensive Idea

In 1969, the Minister for Education, Brian Lenihan, issued a booklet to parents, outlining to them "the basic facts about the education of their children". This was a colourful and attractive publication and it was delivered to every household in the country. It set out government policy on relation to post-primary educational provision under the heading -"The Comprehensive Idea":

> The comprehensive system is fully in operation today only in the State comprehensive schools. One of the functions of these schools is to set a headline for the rest of the country. Not many of them will be built in the future - mainly because the *comprehensive system can be created in most districts through co-operation between the existing schools*. (original italics). That co-operation has already begun: many schools now share teachers and equipment and even interchange classes. So while you may not have a State comprehensive school in your district, you should soon have a comprehensive unit made up of two or more post-primary schools. While your child will attend his own school for most subjects, he may go elsewhere for subjects that his own school does not provide.

It was clear from this booklet that the Minister envisaged that the "comprehensive idea" could be delivered in various ways. One possibility would be shared facilities and possibly shared classes. In this situation, different schools in a town or suburb which had specialist facilities would work out an arrangement with the other school or schools to enable sharing of facilities. For example, pupils in the girls' school (which might have no science laboratory facilities) would attend the boys' school for science classes and in turn the girls' school might provide home economics classes for the pupils of the boys' school. Another example might be a system of common enrolment, whereby pupils would enrol in the "post-primary system" of a town, rather than in any one school. In this situation, the schools would co-operate in drawing up the weekly timetable to enable all pupils of the area to avail of the subjects offered in the different schools.

"County Reports" - late 1960s / early 1970s

[8] These scholarships had been introduced in the early years of the Free State. They were awarded to a small number of the most academically able pupils in each county and were usually means tested.

By the end of the 1960s, the Department of Education had drawn up a detailed analysis of the post-primary facilities available in each of the 26 counties. The counties were sub-divided into catchment areas, and an analysis was made of the likely demand for places in post-primary schools based on enrolments in the primary schools in each catchment area. A series of local meetings was organised throughout the country at which officials from the Department of Education discussed with local audiences the optimum "way forward" in relation to post-primary education in each locality. Solutions and proposals varied from closure of small and apparently unviable schools, to amalgamation of existing schools to expansion or enlargement, to the building of completely new schools. These public meetings were usually very well attended and local response varied from the enthusiastic to the downright hostile. In some cases, the meetings paved the way for reform and development - in other cases they resulted in entrenched positions being taken by local vested interest groups, which proved very difficult to dislodge in later years. The legacy of these positions remains in some areas to the present day.

1970 - Community School Document - "a unified post-primary system of education".

In October 1970, a document entitled "Community School" was issued by the Department of Education. It was initially sent to the Catholic hierarchy and was subsequently more widely disseminated. The document indicated that the government planned to develop a network of (post-primary) community schools throughout the country and stated that the schools should be seen in the context of the following aspects of government policy:

- the provision of free post-primary education for all children irrespective of ability and ***without the use of selection procedures on transfer from primary to post-primary;*** (my italics)
- the elimination of the barriers between secondary and vocational schools and the creation of a unified post-primary system of education;
- the provision of comprehensive facilities in each area of the country so as to cater for the varying aptitudes and abilities of pupils and to provide reasonable equality of educational opportunity for all our children irrespective of the area of the country in which they reside or the means of their parents;
- the elimination of overlapping and duplication in the provision of teachers, buildings and equipment so that the available resources in manpower and finance may be utilised to best advantage and so make resources available to improve the level of services in our post-primary schools.

Defending the issuing of this document, the then Minister for Education, Padraig Faulkner, stated in November 1970:

> On numerous occasions in this House and also in An Seanad, I have referred to the necessity to secure in every area of the country, post-primary educational provision which would be such as to cater for the aptitude and ability of all the pupils in the area. I referred in this respect also to the necessity to establish larger school units as no small school could by itself provide the range of subjects and facilities which would be required.

The document initially caused a lot of controversy, particularly in relation to the proposed management structure of these schools. It took more than ten years of negotiations with the Churches, management bodies and teacher unions before a Deed of Trust for Community Schools was agreed. This did not however, prevent the government from proceeding with the building of such schools and by 1980 there were a total of xx Community schools in operation. Community schools have since then been the preferred option of the Dept. of Education for new schools in green field areas. The Community School model is also the preferred model in areas where amalgamation and/or rationalisation is taking place. Such rationalisation can result from a variety of causes, including the withdrawal of a religious order from an area, or a decision by two or more schools to amalgamate.

The agreement that was finally reached in relation to Deeds of Trust of Community Schools means that in terms of their management structure, these schools are effectively Catholic schools, although it is unlikely that either the State or the Catholic Church would formally concede that this is the case. The Catholic authorities have reserved places on the Boards of Management; can demand and get reserved teaching posts for members of religious orders; have agreed conditions regarding religious teaching and are entitled to employ paid Catholic chaplains. However, in terms of their ethos "on the ground", most

people would agree that the Community School ethos is inclusive and that pupils of all religions and none are welcomed and respected.

Withdrawal of Capitation Grant from Fee-Paying Catholic Secondary schools - 1985

The 1980s was a decade of economic recession and when the Fine Gael / Labour Coalition government came into power in 1982, it was committed to reducing public expenditure. Among the cutbacks made during its term of office was the withdrawal of capitation grants to fee-paying Catholic schools. Teachers' salaries continued to be paid to recognised teachers in these schools but other recurrent grants would no longer be paid. It was initially the government's intention to discontinue paying capital grants to fee-paying schools, but in practice this did not happen. While the withdrawal of capitation grants to these schools led to an increase in their fees and initially to a reduction in the number of pupils attending such schools, in the 1990s, with an improvement in the economy, demand for places in fee-paying schools increased again. Currently, many fee-paying schools cannot meet the demand for places.

1990s

The 1990s was a decade of educational reform and development. Investment in education again became a catchword and there was a commitment by successive governments to put education high on the political agenda. Reform and change took place in a context of partnership between the various bodies involved in education - management, teachers, parents, employers, trade unions and the social partners. A major National Education Convention was held in 1993 and this was followed in 1994 by a series of Roundtable discussions about various aspects of education including Regionalisation and Control and Governance of schools. The demographic picture had also changed in the 1990s, and would have a major impact on enrolment at post-primary schools. The number of births had begun to fall in the early 1980s and this effected post-primary enrolments from the early 1990s. From a peak of 75,000 births in the year 1980, the numbers fell to 48,000 in the mid-1990s.

1993 - Circular forbidding the use of Entrance examinations for selection purposes.

The Programme for Government, drawn up by the Coalition partners of Labour and Fianna Fail in 1992, included a commitment to the ending of any remaining vestiges of selection at post-primary level. At Easter 1993, when attending the Teacher Union Conferences, Labour Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, expressed concern that the systems of selection operated by some post-primary schools were a barrier to equality of education. She indicated her total opposition to selection based on pupils' academic ability.

At her request, in June 1993, the three post-primary managerial associations - the Joint Managerial Body (representing secondary schools); the Irish Vocational Education Association and the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools met with officials of the Department of Education to discuss the issue. Following this meeting, an "Agreed Memorandum of Understanding" was drawn up in relation to selection procedures for the enrolment of pupils in second-level schools. Since this memorandum of understanding continues to underpin post-primary entry in the Republic of Ireland, it is reproduced in full in the appendix to this paper.

In summary, all parties agreed that selection of students for enrolment in post-primary schools should not be based on academic ability. Where schools received more enrolment applications than they could cater for, it was accepted that some selection process would be required. The following examples of selection procedures were given:

- Priority given to pupils from national schools in the area;
- Enrolment on a "first-come" first-served" basis;
- Random selection on the basis of age of applicants;
- Priority to brother and sisters of pupils already enrolled in the school;
- Priority given to pupils of a particular religious denomination.

However, the memorandum emphasised that post-primary schools should, first and foremost, cater for children from their own communities and catchment areas.

The document stated that "It has been suggested that examinations or assessment tests are useful for placement purposes following enrolment and there may be merit in this claim" and went on to add:

> However, there is no reason why such tests, if considered necessary, cannot be organised after enrolment has been decided. A common enrolment date should obtain for all schools in a particular catchment area.

The memorandum concluded by alerting all concerned that a circular would shortly be issued to schools and stated that "following the issue of this circular, **post-primary schools should not use entrance examinations or other mechanisms for the purpose of awarding places to applicants in the order of their academic or intellectual ability"**

On 2nd December 1993, the promised circular was issued by the Department of Education. The circular conceded that "school enrolment policy is a matter for the managerial authorities of each individual school" but pointed out that "the Minister and the national representatives of school managerial associations are agreed that selection on the basis of academic ability must be discontinued". It went on to state that "it is important that each school should disclose its enrolment policy and the criteria used in selecting pupils for enrolment". This circular continues to be official policy on selection to post-primary schools.

While the policies of successive governments of all parties since the 1960s had frowned on selection, this circular was the first direct instruction to post-primary schools to discontinue the practice of selection on the basis of entrance examinations. There is no information available as to how many schools administered such tests, or in what areas they were situated, but complaints from primary teachers that entrance examinations by post-primary schools distorted the curriculum of the primary school, tended to come from some (but not all) city and urban areas. Cities worst affected seemed to be Cork, Waterford and Limerick and to a lesser extent Galway. Some suburbs of Dublin were also effected. However, the practice of entrance examinations was by no means universal.

1995: White Paper on Education: Charting Our Education Future

It is of interest to note that while the multi-lateral discussions of the period 1993/1994 covered a wide range of educational topics, the issue of selection to post-primary education was not an issue of major concern. There had been little discussion of issues relating to transfer to second level schools in either the Green Paper on Education in 1993[9] or in the Report on the National Education Convention published the following year[10]. However, the White Paper on Education, issued in 1995[11], recognised what were referred to as the "transitional challenges" experienced by pupils on the transition from primary to second level schools and suggested that the proposed (regional) education boards[12i] would be responsible for certain "actions" to deal with these challenges. The White Paper stated:

> Junior Cycle education, involving co-operation and not competition among schools, will be open to all on the basis of equal opportunity and equality of participation, including gender equality and equality for those with special needs. Responsibility for the realisation of this objective will be assigned statutorily to the education boards. In observing the statutory objective, education boards will be responsible for the implementation and review of admissions policies to second-level schools, so as to ensure that national agreements and policies on selective academic entry tests are operated.

The White paper reflected earlier government policy on curricular choice by recommending that "students ….should be allowed maximum choice for as long as possible before making decisions regarding examination subject choice or subject level". And in a reference to tracking and monitoring of the school attendance of students of compulsory school-going age, the Paper stated that "one aspect of this responsibility will be ensuring the transfer of students' profile cards from primary to second

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[9] Green Paper on Education: *Education for a Changing World,* 1993.
[10] J. Coolahan *Report on the National Education Convention,* 1994.
[11] White Paper on Education *Charting Our Education Future,* 1995.
[12] In the event, regional education boards were not set up. While they were supported by the Fine Gael and Labour parties, they were consistently opposed by Fianna Fail. Consequently, when Fianna Fail came into government in 1997, proposals to introduce regional education boards were dropped and the Education Act (1998) does not make provision for such boards.

level schools". It added: "Any information on a profile card should not prejudice a student on entry to a second level school".

At this point, it should be mentioned that the question of introducing some form of intermediate structures between the Department of Education and individual schools, had been hotly debated on a number of occasions between the 1960s and the 1990s. It had been variously suggested that local structures (e,g, based on county divisions) or regional structures (based on groupings of counties), should be put in place to facilitate co-ordination and delivery of educational services. Following the partnership talks and the Roundtable discussions of 1993 and 1994, it appeared as if agreement had been reached about putting in place regional structures, even if some of the partners were less than enthusiastic about such a development. The first draft of the Education Bill of 1997 included a proposal to introduce Regional Boards but when the Bill was finally enacted in 1998 (under a Fianna Fail government) this provision had been removed. The failure to introduce an intermediate structure in education in the south, has resulted in difficulties in co-ordinating and delivering certain services e.g. psychological services; special needs teachers, early years education, and adult education services. This failure has been commented on as a weakness of the system by a number of commentators, e.g. the OECD in 1991, the authors of the recently published White Paper on Adult Education and most recently by the Cromien report on the administration of educational services.

Commission on School Accommodation

In the mid 1990s, the government set up a Commission on School Accommodation whose role it is to advise the Department of Education on future needs for school accommodation at all levels of the education system. The Commission is currently engaged in an assessment of the needs of the post-primary system. Its immediate focus is the carrying out a detailed analysis of three separate and distinctly different areas of the country with a view to advising on how the longer term post-primary accommodation needs of these areas might be met. Issues being considered in this review include the current and future demographic pattern of the area; relative demand for the different types of schools; resources available to existing schools including accommodation, specialist teaching space and equipment, teachers etc. It is expected that both the excesses and shortfalls of the system will be identified on an area by area basis and in the light of these detailed analyses, the Commission will make recommendations to the Minister for Education

Curriculum Changes in the 1990s:

The aspiration of having a unified or common examination for all pupils at the end of junior cycle had been voiced by successive Ministers in the 1970s and 1980s. But it was not until 1989 that Minister Mary O'Rourke announced that the (separate) Intermediate and Group Certificate examinations were to be abolished and that from 1992 onwards a single common examination, the Junior Certificate, would be introduced.

During the 1990s, there was also considerable debate about the type of curriculum that should be made available for the growing numbers of young people who were remaining on in full-time education from 16 to 18 years of age[13]. Some people argued that a two track system should be introduced for 16 to 18 year olds and that selection should be introduced at the end of junior cycle. This would mean that academically inclined pupils would follow the (established) Leaving Certificate course, and that a new vocationally oriented course should be introduced for less academically inclined pupils. There was a lot of discussion about whether all post-primary schools would offer both tracks or not. In the event, the decision was taken in the mid 1990s, not to adopt a strict tracking or selective system but to adopt the system which is described below. It is a matter for pupils following consultation with their parents and the schools authorities, to choose the type of Leaving Certificate courses which they wish to take. Not all courses are offered in all schools, so in practice, a pupil's choice might be curtailed by geographical reality.

Post-primary Curriculum

All second level pupils in Ireland follow the same three-year junior cycle curriculum regardless of whether they attend a secondary school, a vocational school, a community or a comprehensive school.

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[13] By the early 1990s, almost 80% of the age cohort remained in full-time education and in the Green Paper of 1993, the government had set a goal of 90% retention to the end of senior cycle by the year 2000. In the event, this goal has not been reached.

The Junior Certificate programme was introduced in 1989 to provide a single unified programme for students aged between 12 and 15 years of age and students sit a national public examination at the end of the three years cycle. Following the junior cycle, students proceed to a further two or three years in senior cycle. There is an optional one-year Transition Year Programme followed by a choice of three two-year Leaving Certificate programmes – the (established) Leaving Certificate; the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied. The (established) Leaving Certificate has traditionally had a strong academic bias, although within the past twenty years or so, it has included an increasing number of practical subjects. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied were introduced within the past decade to provide more relevant and vocationally oriented programmes for the growing numbers of young people who are staying on in full-time education after the Junior Certificate.

Junior Cycle

The junior cycle of the second level curriculum is a three year cycle, at the end of which pupils sit a national public examination - the Junior Certificate Examination - typically taking seven or eight subjects. All pupils sit an examination in Irish, English and Mathematics; the majority take History and Geography; a modern continental language, (French or German or Spanish or Italian) 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. The primary objective of the Junior Certificate programme is to enable students to complete a broad, balanced and coherent course of study in a variety of curricular areas. The programme seeks to extend and deepen the quality of students' educational experience in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies and to prepare them for further study in senior cycle.

The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) is an alternative approach to the Junior Certificate. It is specifically aimed at the potential early school leaver and other students who have difficulty in coping with the junior cycle curriculum. In the JCSP, the teachers adapt the curriculum to make the whole school experience more relevant and meaningful for students at risk. The programme emphasises numeracy and literacy as well as personal and social needs. The emphasis is on the process of learning rather than on a terminal examination, on what students can do rather than on what they can't do. A system of profiling is used to provide affirmation of learning for pupils on this programme. The numbers currently taking this programme is c. xxxxx or xx% of pupils at that level.

Senior Cycle

Students may spend up to three years in senior cycle. They may follow a two-year Leaving Certificate programme immediately after Junior Certificate, or they may opt to follow a Transition Year programme before a two-year Leaving Certificate. A student may follow the (established) Leaving Certificate course or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme or the Leaving Certificate Applied.

The **Transition Year Programme** has as its overall mission the promotion of the holistic development of students and their preparation for their role as citizens. Its aims are:

- to give students space and time to mature humanly, through the use of an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum and of experiential learning opportunities, free from the pressure of public examinations
- to improve students' learning strategies
- to give students an opportunity to experience the world of work and to reflect on that experience.

Teachers of Transition Year have greater flexibility and professional opportunities to design curricula, modules and short courses which are more tailored to the specific needs of their students than any other year of post-primary education. Parents, the community and local enterprise are all encouraged to support students during Transition Year. There is growing evidence that students who have taken the Transition Year Programme are more self-reliant learners when they enter third-level education than their peers.

The majority of Senior Cycle students choose the **established Leaving Certificate,** taking subjects (usually between six and eight) at either Foundation[14], Ordinary or Higher Level. Students may choose from a total of 31 subjects. At the end of the two year programme, there are written terminal

[14] Foundation level is available in two subjects - Irish and Mathematics.

examinations for all subjects. In addition, there are oral and aural examinations for Gaeilge (Irish) and modern languages; practical and project tests in Music, Art, Engineering and Construction Studies; and a number of subjects – including Geography and History – allow for the option of allocating some marks to project or field work. However, this option is rarely availed of by schools.

The **Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme** is a two-year programme which comprises groupings of the subjects of the established Leaving Certificate Programme with some additional modules. The programme was first introduced in 1989. In 1994, it was expanded to broaden the choice of subjects and to strengthen the vocational content of the programme by including three link modules on Enterprise Education, Preparation for Work and Work Experience. The activities involved in the Link Modules include the organisation and running of mini-enterprises, visits to businesses and industry and investigations of the local community. Assessment of the Link Modules comprises two elements: Written Examination (40% of marks) and Portfolio of Coursework (60% of marks). Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme students receive the same certificate as established Leaving Certificate students. In addition their Certificate includes a statement of the results of the Link Modules (Pass, Merit, Distinction) At present, about xx% of Leaving Certificate pupils take the LCVP.

The Leaving Certificate Applied is intended to meet the needs of those students who are not adequately catered for by other Leaving Certificate Programmes. It is a two-year modular programme with three principal elements - Vocational Preparation, Vocational Education and General Education. It is pupil-centred and involves a cross-curricular approach rather than a subject-based structure. Student achievement and performance are assessed in a number of ways. Students are required to complete a number of modules, each module representing a block of 40 hours. In order to be awarded credit each student must complete each module by attending the classes and out of school activities related to the module and by completing key assignments related to the module. This accounts at present for 40% of the total marks. Performance assessment of student tasks accounts for a further 27% of the total marks. Students complete a number of "tasks" in the course of the two years. The tasks are assessed by external examiners appointed by the Department of Education and Science. These tasks may be in a variety of formats - written, audio, video, artefact etc. Each student is also required to produce a report on the process of completing the task. This report may be incorporated in the evidence of task performance.

In addition to the task assessments and ongoing accreditation for the completion of modules, students sit external examinations accounting for the remaining 33% of the total marks at the end of Year 2 in the following areas:

- English and Communication (oral, aural and written)
- Two Vocational Specialisms
- Mathematical Applications
- Language (Gaeilge Chumarsáideach and Modern European Languages -oral, aural and written)
- Social Education.

In the school year 1999/2000, the Leaving Certificate Applied was offered in 237 schools and centres and 7,500 pupils were enrolled on the programme.

Evidence on the most "Effective" Types of Schools

Unlike Northern Ireland where statistical information is available on an annual basis on the examination results of pupils in different kinds of schools, and research has been carried out to compare the value-added elements of pupil performance in different school types, no such information is available on a routine basis in the Republic of Ireland. However, a recently published study by Emer Smyth of the Economic and Social Research Institute in Dublin[15] suggests that at Junior Certificate level, there is no appreciable difference in performance between pupils in the different types of school. Her report states:

> When pupil background, prior ability and social context are taken into account, there are no significant performance differences between coed secondary, single-sex secondary and community/comprehensive schools. However, controlling for social context, vocational

[15] Emer Smyth *Do Schools Differ* Dublin: Oaktree Press, 1999.

> schools appear to boost performance for boys but not for girls. This boost for boys in vocational schools is only apparent when social mix of the school is taken into account, that is, boys in vocational schools do better than would be expected given the high concentration of working class pupils in these schools. However, there are no significant differences between the vocational sector and other school types when only individual pupil background and prior ability are taken into account. School type, therefore, tells us little about differences between schools in average exam results.

As regards Leaving Certificate results, Dr. Smyth's conclusions are similar:

> Differences between school sectors ….. are no longer significant when account is taken of gender, family background and prior performance. There is some variation in exam scores between school sectors but none of the differences are statistically significant. Therefore, the raw grade differences reported between pupils in different school types reflect differences in the gender, social class and ability mix of the pupil intake rather than a sectoral effect *per se*.

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