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How the National Education Convention in 1993 contributed to a vision for the future of Irish Education

Presentation by Áine Hyland at the Department of Education and Youth Research Summit Dublin Castle, 18th November 2025.

Abstract:

The Department of Education and Youth plans to hold a National Education Convention in Ireland in 2006. In advance of the Convention, the Department hosted a Research Summit on the theme of "*A Vision for the future of Irish Education"* in Croke Park, Dublin on 18th November 2025. More than 50 presentations were made by researchers from all levels of education. This paper was presented by Áine Hyland who had attended the last National Education Convention in October 1993, drawing on her archive of submissions and reports from that convention.

Key Words: National Education Convention; Research Summit; Future of Education.

How the National Education Convention in 1993 contributed to a vision for the future of Irish Education

Presentation by Áine Hyland at the Department of Education and Youth Research Summit Dublin Castle, 18th November 2025.

This paper will discuss how the National Education Convention in 1993 contributed to a vision for the future of Irish education and to subsequent legislation. The paper will provide a background to educational developments in the 1980s and 1990s. It will summarise the Green Paper of 1992; discuss regional consultative meetings in 1992 and 1993 and will focus on the National Education Convention which was held in Dublin Castle in October 1993. It will discuss how all these discourses as well as a Roundtable Convention on Regional Education Councils and a position paper on Governance of Schools in summer 1994 contributed to a White Paper on Education in 1995. After many years of debate and deliberations, the Universities (Ireland) Act and the Education (Ireland) Act were finally passed in 1997 and 1998.

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a period of high unemployment and economic depression. A report in 1992 (the Culliton report) was a response to a critical unemployment situation and called for a choice between "enterprise or emigration." It recommended a stronger focus in post-primary education on the world of work – a more utilitarian emphasis.

The 1980s and 1990s were also decades of political instability in Ireland with no fewer than 14 Ministers for Education – Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour. While they had different educational policy priorities, they were all agreed on the need for comprehensive educational legislation. Significant educational change had occurred in the previous decades. Minister John Wilson had issued a White Paper on Education in 1980, and Minister Gemma Hussey had issued a Green Paper on Education in 1985, but no legislation had been passed.

In 1990 at the request of Minister Mary O'Rourke, John Coolahan, Professor of Education in Maynooth University, with Department of Education assistant secretaries Oliver Cussen and Jack O'Brien, drafted a Green Paper. The then Secretary of the Department, Noel Lindsay, didn't like the draft but Minister Mary O'Rourke supported it and encouraged the focus and the approach that was taken in that paper.

In early 1992 Séamus Brennan replaced Mary O'Rourke as Minister for Education and some months later he published an "Introduction to a Green Paper" which was very different to the draft which had been prepared by John Coolahan. (It is likely that Séamus Brennan's paper was influenced by Noel Lindsay). It had a strong focus on enterprise and included a proposal that a new subject titled "*Enterprise and Technology"* would be mandatory for all junior cycle students. The Green Paper itself, *Education for a Changing World,* was published a few months later. Its six key aims were summarised as follows:

- to establish greater equality in education
- to broaden Irish education to equip students for life and for work in an enterprise culture and for European citizenship
- to make the best use of education resources
- to train and develop teachers to equip them for a constantly changing environment
- to create a system of effective quality assurance
- to ensure greater openness and accountability and to maximise parent involvement and choice.

Responses were invited to the Green Paper and during the following months a series of regional meetings were held. The Paper proved to be controversial – there were objections to its utilitarian philosophy and to its lack of balance as well as to proposals for Regional Education Structures. Almost 1000 written submissions were received in response to the Paper.

Following a General Election in November 1992, a new Fianna Fáil / Labour coalition government was formed. In January 1993, Labour T.D. Niamh Bhreathnach was appointed Minister for Education. A *Programme for a Partnership Government* highlighted the importance of education, stating "We regard education as the key to our future prosperity and to equality and equal opportunities for all out citizens". It recognised that in the coming decades, education would play an even more strategic role in the economic, political, social and cultural life of the country and emphasised that careful planning and collaboration with the educational partners would be essential in order for change to be successfully implemented.

In February 1993, a new Secretary (General), Don Thornhill, was appointed to the Department of Education following the retirement of Noel Lindsay. Don Thornhill was a graduate of University College Dublin (B.Sc. and Ph.D.

(Chemistry) and Trinity College Dublin (M.Sc. (Econ). He came to the Dept. of Education from the Office of the Revenue Commissioners with an open mind about education. Both the Minister and the Secretary General were newcomers to the Department of Education, and I was optimistic that they would be open to new ideas and would not be unduly influenced by the traditions, policies and practices of the Department.

I was chair of *Educate Together* at that time – an organisation that was still regarded with suspicion by some senior civil servants in the Department of Education. Until then, *Educate Together* had not been invited to any of the regional meetings. The first public meeting following the appointment of Bhreathnach and Thornhill was held in Kilkenny on the 4th of March 1993, and much to my delight, I was invited to be one of the speakers.

Niamh Bhreathnach opened the meeting with an impressive speech in which she presaged a new era in Irish education. She was followed by Don Thornhill who gave an excellent PowerPoint presentation. PowerPoint was in its infancy – used only by a few innovative people at that time – so my optimism that educational policy was entering a new phase was confirmed! Some months later, I was also invited to be involved in the final Green Paper seminar which was held in Malahide in May 1993. At that seminar, I was rapporteur of a working group on Educational Structures – a session chaired by Sr. Eileen Randles of the Catholic Primary School Managers Association.

At the meeting in May 1993, Minister Bhreathnach announced that she intended to hold a National Education Convention in autumn, at which the issues raised in the Green Paper would be further discussed and debated. John Coolahan was asked by the Minister to prepare a background paper – a paper which removed some of the more controversial proposals of Minister Brennan's Green Paper. Coolahan's Background Paper was circulated in advance of the Convention and set the debate within a more balanced and inclusive philosophical framework.

The National Education Convention took place in Dublin Castle from the 11th to the 21st of October 1993. It was a gargantuan undertaking, meticulously organized by Department of Education officials. The Chair of the Convention was Professor Dervilla Donnelly. The secretariat comprised 7 academics and researchers - John Coolahan, Patrick Clancy, Sheelagh Drudy, Damien Hannon, Tom Kelleghan, Seamus McGuinness and Máire Bean Uí Mhaicín. There were three international consultants - Professors Peter Mortimore, Malcolm Skilbeck

and Gaito Ramirez. The convention lasted for two weeks with morning and afternoon sessions. More than 40 organizations were represented, and written and oral presentations were made by teacher unions, management bodies, employer and parent representatives, as well as organisations which had been seeking engagement with the department for many years. This was an opportunity for them to raise their concerns publicly and to be listened to. The Department of Education representatives were treated like other participants - they made presentations and were expected to engage in discussion and debate. Sessions were open to the public and to the media and there was significant coverage in the press and on RTE.

In January 1994 the Report on the National Education Convention was published. The secretariat, led by John Coolahan, had worked tirelessly during November and December to ensure that the report would be available early in the New Year. It is an outstanding report, comprehensive in its coverage and impressive in its vision and recommendations. As Coolahan subsequently wrote in 2017: *"The National Education Convention was a landmark event in the shaping of educational policy in modern Ireland, and its impact was to be very far reaching and long lasting".*

An analysis of the report today - 30 years after its publication - indicates how much has been achieved as a result of that report as well as what proposals have yet to be fully implemented. The latter include the setting up of Intermediate education structures, provision of multi denominational and secular schools, and some equality issues (educational disadvantage, special needs, travellers) which have not yet been fully addressed.

In the light of current plans for a National Education Convention in the coming months, it is interesting to ask "Why was the 1993 National Education Convention so successful?". In my view the following are some of the factors that contributed to its success:

- The **inclusive** nature of the Convention
- The **independence** of the chair and the secretariat
- **Trust** in the process and in the chair and secretariat
- A willingness on the part of the chair and the secretariat **to listen,** and to treat all speakers with **respect**.
- The convention was conducted with **dignity and integrity**
- The process and deliberations were **open and transparent.**

Some quotations from the report are worth repeating here, including the following:

> *The education system cannot and should not be held responsible for the high level of socioeconomic inequality in society nor for the level of unemployment present in the economy. These are due to much more deep seated historical structural causes.*

Another recommendation, which has been repeated in subsequent reports, reads as follows:

> *Any effective programme of educational intervention would need the combined support of all the local social agencies – health, welfare, justice, housing etc.*

The chapter on Equality concluded with the following statement:

> *The government may be underestimating the serious difficulties involved in tackling effectively educational failure and inequality. The problem it is very deep seated and very difficult to tackle.*

The final chapter of the report on the resourcing and implementation of educational change is as relevant today as it was then:

> *The issue of funding cannot be marginalized in future policy decisions. Increased resources are by no means the only ingredient for a major educational reform process but they are an essential element if reform efforts are not to become frustrated and counterproductive. Just as society has greater expectations of and places more demands on education, the educationalists are entitled to seek extra resources from society to enable them to fulfil a more expanded and complex role while accepting the discipline of efficiency and accountability.*

Epilogue

While the National Education Convention of 1993 was comprehensive in its coverage, further discussions on Regional Education Councils and on the Governance of schools were held in summer 1994. In April 1995, the White Paper – *Charting Our Education Future* - was published by Minister Bhreathnach.

Following further discussion and consultation, including discussions on adult education and early childhood education, the Universities (Ireland) Act was

passed just before Niamh Bhreathnach ended her term of office as Minister in 1997. The drafting of the Education bill and its passage through the Oireachtas had been virtually completed when Niamh Bhreathnach left office. Shortly after Micheál Martin was appointed Minister for Education, the Education (Ireland) Act 1998 was passed.

Legislation had been a long time gestating, and these two acts were the first comprehensive educational legislation passed, not only since the foundation of the state in 1922, but in over 150 years of publicly funded education in Ireland.

THE END