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Authors	Hyland, Áine
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Primary Education in Ireland

Paper presented by Professor Áine Hyland, University College, Cork, Ireland at a Seminar on Educational Reform in Brasilia 13th August 2007.

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"Quality education is the most valuable asset for present and future generations. Achieving it requires a strong commitment from everyone, including governments, teachers, parents and students themselves. The OECD is contributing to this goal through PISA, which monitors results in education within an agreed framework, allowing for valid international comparisons."
(Angel Gurria, OECD Secretary-General, 2006)

This paper proposes to examine developments in primary (elementary) education in Ireland in the past generation and to identify some of the factors which have contributed to the current success of the Irish education system. It will also identify shortcomings in the Irish system and comment on policies and practices which have been introduced to address these shortcomings. The Irish system will be analysed from an international perspective, using data from the most recent OECD international comparisons in *Education at a Glance*. Data related to pupil achievement, especially data on literacy and numeracy, will be taken from the 2003 OECD PISA study.

Ireland is an island in the Nth. Atlantic Ocean off the west coast of Europe. It covers an area of 70,000 sq. kilometres. It has been an independent republic since 1921; a member of the OECD since the OECD was set up in 1960 and a member of the European Union (EU) since 1972. It has a population of 4,235,000 people. From being one of the poorest countries of the EU in the 1970's, Ireland is now one of the richest. Its economic success is in part due to its early membership of the European Union but it is also widely recognised that education has also played a key role in that success. Ireland's recent wealth relies heavily on what has become known as the "knowledge economy", which in turn is a product of a well educated workforce.

All the economic indicators point to Ireland as being one of the most successful economies in Europe. Annual GDP growth has been above 4% in recent years and was over 5% in 2006. Public finances are in a robust state with a projected govt. surplus of 1% of GDP. Growth in GDP is expected to average 5% for the next few years, almost twice the average OECD rate. Ireland has the lowest level of unemployment in the EU, the second highest minimum wage and the highest investment in infrastructure. Ireland's current unemployment rate is 4.4%. Total employment continues to rise and by mid 2006, the level of employment exceeded 2 million for the first time in the history of the State. The labour force has expanded in recent years at an annual rate of 4.7% mainly reflecting higher female participation rates and continued net inward migration. Non-Irish nationals now account for between 8% and 10% of the labour force.

The population of Ireland in 2006 was 4,235,000 – the highest recorded since 1861. This represents an increase of 8% since the last census in 2001. The annual number of births has increased from 48,000 in 1994 to 62,000 in 2004 with a projected continuing growth to about 70,000 births in 2010. Inward migration is a major factor in overall population growth. On average there are 46,000 more immigrants than emigrants every year with an annual excess of births over deaths of 33,000. In the past, Ireland was largely a culturally homogenous society. To-day, as a result of recent immigration, it is estimated that between 5% and 10% of primary school pupils were born outside Ireland. In some schools the proportion of newcomer (or immigrant) children can be up to 50%.

Schooling is compulsory in Ireland between the ages of 6 and 16, but children may enroll in schools from the age of 4. Pre-primary education is provided in primary schools from 4 to 6 years of age; primary education is provided from the age of 6 to 12; second level junior cycle education is provided from 12 to 15, and second level senior cycle education is provided from 15 to 18 years of age. The second level curriculum is an undifferentiated one (i.e. students are not streamed into academic or vocational streams) – and the same curriculum is available to all pupils, regardless of what kind of a school they attend[1]. There is no national examination or testing at primary level. All pupils sit the same national examination at Junior Cert (15 years of age) and Leaving Cert (18 years of age)[2]. Students may choose different subjects at either Ordinary or Higher Level and take six or seven subjects for the Leaving Certificate. Recent OECD figures indicate that Ireland has one of the highest retention rates to Leaving Cert – almost 85% of pupils sit the Leaving Certificate, over 85% of whom proceed to some form of further or higher education or training. Today, only 3.2% of the cohort leaves school before the age of 15.

This is a significant turn-around since 1965 when a comprehensive survey of Irish education carried out under the auspices of the OECD, entitled *Investment in Education,* highlighted serious weaknesses in the Irish education system. This study was carried out in a context of national poverty, where emigration was rife and unemployment was high. An economic development plan had been adopted by the Irish government – and this plan identified investment in education as one of the solutions to Ireland's poverty and unemployment. In the 1960s, the OECD was carrying out a number of national economic studies - Mediterranean Regional Projects (MRPs) and Education Investment and Planning Programmes (EIPs) - and it was agreed that Ireland would be included among these studies.

The *Investment in Education* report (1965) proved to be a clarion call to Irish education policy-makers. It identified major weaknesses and inequalities in the system, with high levels of early school leaving, especially among pupils from lower socio-economic

[1] Traditionally schools had been categorized into academic secondary schools (mostly run by the Church) and vocational schools, and while the ownership structures of these schools remain largely unchanged, all schools now provide the same broad curriculum.

[2] While all get the same Certificate i.e. the Leaving Certificate, about 7% of pupils take a combination of practical and applied subjects which are work-oriented and which are not accepted for university entrance purposes. This Leaving Cert is entitled the Applied Leaving Cert.

backgrounds; among girls in urban areas; and boys in rural areas. Class sizes in primary schools were very large – almost 50% of pupils in primary schools were in classes of more than 40 pupils and over 20% were in classes of over 50. Pupil's academic results at the Primary Certificate examination (an exam then taken at the end of six years of basic education) were poor, with more than 25% of pupils either failing the Primary Certificate or dropping out of school before taking the exam. Over 55% of pupils failed to complete three years of junior cycle second level education – the minimum level required for employability in the new industries which Ireland had begun to attract from overseas - and only 20% of the age cohort completed second level education. Part of the problem was the cost to the family of second level schooling - second level education was not free – pupils were required to pay fees. But poor academic achievement at basic education level was also a problem - those who failed to pass the Primary Certificate examination would not be in a position to participate successfully in second level education. The secondary school curriculum had a strong academic bias, with an emphasis on Literature and the Classics, and with little emphasis on Science and Mathematics subjects which would form the basis of many of the new industries. Vocational schools, which had been set up in the 1930s to provides vocationally oriented education, provided only a limited curriculum and tended to be perceived as schools for less able pupils. There was little or no access to technologically advanced education. Only about 5% of the population was in a position to avail of university and higher education which was largely classical and literary in nature and available only to those whose families could afford to pay fees and forego the potential earnings of their children.

Following publication of the *Investment in Education* report in 1965, the Irish government was galvanised into making major changes in the education system to address the weaknesses and inequalities that had been highlighted. The curriculum at primary level was radically revised. A new "child-centred" curriculum was introduced, where the child would be an active agent in his/her own learning, rather than a passive "receptacle" into whom knowledge would be poured. The Primary Certificate examination was abolished and an individual pupil record card was introduced on which the inidividual pupil's progress and achievements were recorded Class sizes were reduced[3], and the pedagogical approach at basic education level changed from didactic class-based teaching to a guided discovery approach. The teacher would become a facilitator of learning and children would play a more active role in their own education. The prescriptive narrow, subject-based curriculum was replaced by Curriculum Guidelines which included a broader range of subjects at basic level (Irish; English; Mathematics; Social and Environmental Studies; Music; Arts and Crafts; Physical Education) and provided flexibility and choice for schools and teachers. A Religious Education programme would continue to be provided in accordance with the religious ethos of the school. A new teacher education programme was introduced to develop an all-graduate teaching profession. While teaching in primary schools had always been a relatively well paid position, the training course had until then, been a two year residential program which did not lead to a university degree. Primary teaching had traditionally attracted high calibre applicants, but from the 1970s onwards, the training

[3] Today, there are no pupils in classes of over 40, compared to over 50% of pupils forty years ago.

course became a three or four year integrated degree course (integrating subject expertise with pedagogic skills) leading to a B.Ed degree.

A major building programme was undertaken at basic education level to ensure that pupils had access to comfortable and well-equipped school accommodation. Many small (one and two teacher) schools were closed or amalgamated (most of these had no electricity or running water) and school transport was introduced for pupils in rural areas who lived more than three miles (about 5 kilometres) from the nearest school. The school leaving age was raised to 15 and a commitment was made that all pupils would have a place in a second level school. Second-level fees were abolished, and the immediate growth in pupil numbers required significant investment in buildings and teachers. A means tested scholarship scheme was introduced for pupils who could benefit from university education but who could not afford the fees. (In the mid 1990s university fees were abolished for all students and university education is now free for all those who qualify for a university place). A network of Regional Technical Colleges (now called Institutes of Technology) was built throughout the country to provide high-quality technological education to cater for the many new industries which were being attracted into the country.

The 1970s and early 1980s saw very significant growth in participation in second and third level education and the emphasis in those years was largely on ensuring that the infrastructure and availability of trained teachers for primary and second level schools grew in parallel with growing student demand. By the mid 1980s, the emphasis had switched from quantity to quality – steps began to be taken to ensure that the curriculum, particularly at second level, was appropriate to varying student needs and to the needs of employers. Following considerable national debate and consultation about the structure of the curriculum, it was decided to adopt a largely undifferentiated curriculum i.e. a curriculum which did not stream pupils into an academic or a vocational stream. The long-standing practice of streaming pupils in second level schools by academic ability into various "ability" streams, was gradually phased out and mixed ability teaching was encouraged, especially at junior cycle (aged 12 to 15). A range of supports was put in place to ensure that high quality education was provided at all levels and that all young people, whatever their background, were in a position to benefit from the schooling provided. This included the provision of specially trained teachers to support pupils with specific learning difficulties and/or with literacy and numeracy problems. The major curriculum reform which was introduced at primary and post-primary levels was undertaken in a spirit of partnership between school Patrons (i.e. owners), curriculum experts, teachers, parents and employers. In the late 1990s the primary curriculum was again revised, but not radically. The revised curriculum placed greater emphasis on numeracy and literacy; encouraged the use of ICT in teaching and learning; provided more explicit guidelines for teachers on the learning outcomes which should be achieved at various stages; and provided guidelines for formative and summative school-based pupil assessment.

To-day, there are 450,000 pupils in 3,150 primary schools taught by 26,280 teachers and a further 320,000 in second level schools, with over 20,000 teachers. Participation in

primary and second-level schools from the age of 6 to 16 is virtually 100%. Almost 85% of pupils complete second level education (one of the highest figures in the OECD[4]) and 85% of these proceed to further or higher education. The second and third level systems are highly regarded internationally and high achieving Irish students are welcomed in universities worldwide for undergraduate and postgraduate education. In the most recent OECD PISA study, Ireland was the second best performing country in the EU in terms of literacy, with only 11% of 15-year olds in Ireland classified as low achievers compared to a mean of almost 19.8% in participating countries[5].

While these figures are heartening and are a tribute to what has been achieved during the past generation, it is also recognised that much remains to be done. There continues to be a significant disparity between the educational opportunities and achievements of those from higher and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Literacy and numeracy rates are lower among pupils from less advantaged backgrounds. Nearly half of the pupils in a sample of schools in disadvantaged areas, surveyed by the Inspectorate in 2005, had very low scores in reading and almost two-thirds were weak in Math. The third-level participation rate of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is much lower that that of their more advantaged peers. For example, a young person from a professional background (e.g. whose parents are doctors or lawyers or engineers etc) is four times more likely to attend university or other higher education institution, than a young person whose parents are unskilled workers or who are unemployed.

There is also a disparity between involvement and academic achievement of males and females at all levels of the education system, with females consistently doing better than boys at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. Almost two thirds of those who leave second level education prior to completing Leaving Cert are boys, and retention is an issue for males not only at second-level but also in further and higher education, where males are less likely to successfully complete their course of study. Females outnumber male students in higher education and female graduates outnumber male graduates at all levels of qualification from Certificate and Diploma up to Masters level. Only at PhD level are there broadly equivalent numbers of male and female graduates.

Other educational challenges which Ireland needs to address are in the areas of numeracy and scientific literacy. Overall numeracy levels in Ireland are at the OECD average; and

[4] The figure given for second level senior cycle completion for Ireland in the OECD Education at a Glance is 90% but this includes young people in Apprenticeship courses and in various vocational preparation and training courses which have not traditionally been regarded as second level senior cycle education in Ireland. However, the 90% is regarded by the OECD as the relevant figure for Ireland for international comparative purposes.

[5] Literacy rates generally have improved in Ireland in recent years in spite of the fact that unlike the U.S. and the U.K., where there has been a strong emphasis on systematic testing and publication of pupil results, Ireland has not adopted a system of national testing or league tables. However, at school level, most teachers use standardised tests to compare their pupils' achievements with the national average but this information is confidential to the individual school and is not made available for comparative or league table purposes.

scientific levels are below the OECD average. Ireland also scores poorly in comparison to other OECD countries on pre-school participation rates and also on the numbers of students pursuing a PhD degree. Ireland's computer-student ratio is low in secondary education, in comparison to other OECD countries.

The issue of pupils with special educational needs is also a challenge for Irish schools. A total of over 9,000 pupils with special educational needs (SEN) are currently enrolled in primary schools. Some of these are in special schools or special classes but the majority of pupils with special needs are now integrated into ordinary classes. The integration of SEN pupils into mainstream education is a new challenge for Irish schools and has resulted in a major increase in resource teachers, special needs teachers and special needs assistants in mainstream schools.

In spite of the success of the education system, public expenditure on education in Ireland as a percentage of total public expenditure is not particularly high – at 13%, it is just at the OECD mean. This compares with more than 20% in New Zealand and with less than 10% in Germany, Italy and Greece. Indeed, expenditure on education in Ireland relative to GDP is low by OECD standards. Ireland's expenditure is less than 4.5% of GDP compared to an OECD mean of over 6%. Iceland, the U.S. and Denmark spend more than 7% of GDP on education.

Similarly, educational expenditure per student in Ireland is relatively low by OECD standards at less than $6,000 per student. This compares with over $11,000 per student in the US but only around $2,000 per student in countries such as the Slovak Republic and Mexico. The average size of class in Ireland is low in comparison with other OECD countries. At primary level, class sizes are among the largest in the OECD, except in the junior primary classes in schools in disadvantaged areas, where government funding is made available for smaller classes.

Factors which contributed to the success of the Irish Educational System

In this section of the paper, it is suggested that the following factors contributed to the successful development of the Irish education system in the past decades, and some relevant issues are analysed:

- ***System of Governance and Management (including parental involvement)***
- ***School Leadership, especially leadership provided by school principal***
- ***Well-educated and well-paid teachers of high academic calibre***
- ***Quality Teacher Education – initial, induction and in-service***
- ***Support Services for school principals and teachers***
- ***Flexible modern Curriculum and pupil assessment***
- ***School Development Planning; setting targets and monitoring achievement of targets at school level***
- ***Whole School Evaluation.***

System of Governance and Management:
For historical reasons, Ireland's system of education is one where all primary schools are privately owned but publicly funded. Over 98% of the population attend local non-fee paying primary schools, and the education system at primary level is not selective or elitist. Most schools (over 98%) are owned by the Churches, the majority by the Catholic Church. Each school has its own Board of Management consisting of representatives of the Patron (who in most cases is the Bishop), of parents and of teachers. Each school employs its own teachers, although salaries are paid by the State. Parental involvement in schools is encouraged and there is a long tradition of voluntary fund-raising to supplement the government grant to schools. There is a strong partnership approach between the State, the local community, teachers and parents. Parents, teachers and employers are represented on national bodies which decide on issues relating to educational policy and curriculum.

However, as parents in relatively wealthy areas are in a position to raise more funds on a voluntary basis than parents in poorer areas, school buildings and equipment in middle and upper class areas are often better resourced than schools in poorer areas. This can militate against the education of pupils in less advantaged areas. To counteract this advantage, extra government grants are available for schools in disadvantaged areas and various schemes are in place to provide extra support for these schools. These include a Home School Community Liaison scheme, a School Completion Programme and a programme referred to as the DEIS programme (Sxxxx), through which schools in designated disadvantage areas are provided with additional resources by government, additional teachers, equipment and financial grants.

At second level, there are four different types of schools – (voluntary) secondary schools; vocational schools; community schools and comprehensive schools. The ownership and management structure of the four types of schools differ for historical reasons but as indicated earlier, they all offer the same curriculum and their pupils sit the same examinations. Outside the main cities and large towns, the second level system is, in general, not selective. In the larger centres of population where there is more than one second level school, some selection still persists, although selection by pupil's academic achievement is not permitted and schools are expected to accept all pupils within their catchment area (in accordance with the religion of the school and the pupils).

School Leadership, especially leadership provided by the school principal:
It is increasingly recognised in the international literature on school effectiveness, that the quality of school leadership, especially the leadership provided by the Principal, is crucial to a school's success. In Ireland, all school principals are recruited from within the teaching profession and principal teachers must have a minimum of five years teaching experience before they can be appointed to a position as principal. Additional financial allowances are paid to principals over and above a teacher's salary – the bigger the school the greater the allowance. A national Leadership Development Support service has recently been set up to provide training and on-going support for schools principals

and teachers in middle management positions, as well as for those aspiring to a position as principal.

School principals at both primary and second level schools have flexibility in relation to the curriculum provided, the teachers appointed and to a more limited extent, the pupils they accept in their individual schools. Since there is no local authority system of school governance in Ireland, schools in Ireland have greater autonomy than their counterparts in many other countries. The State can provide incentives and can influence the school's curriculum through inspection at primary level and through inspection and the national examination system at second level, but because of the largely private ownership of Irish schools, schools in Ireland are generally more autonomous than in other OECD countries, and the power of the State is more limited.

Well-educated and well-paid teachers of a high academic calibre:
Since the 1970s, teaching has been a graduate profession in Ireland. All primary and secondary teachers are University graduates and must complete at least three years of university-level education before qualifying as a teacher. The quality of teacher education is high, at initial, induction and in-service stages. A member of the State Inspectorate examines and certifies each new primary teacher during his/her first year of teaching.

At primary level, aspiring teachers usually enter Teacher Education Colleges at the age of 18 – these colleges are under the control of the Churches but their academic courses are validated by the universities. Primary teaching is a highly regarded profession and entry to primary teacher education courses is competitive. Those who are successful are usually in the top 20% of the Leaving Certificate achievement range. As in many other countries, teaching is increasingly becoming a female profession and in Ireland about 90% of those currently entering the profession are women. The students follow a three year course (in some colleges to be eligible for an honours degree, students must take a four year course) and this course, which leads to a B.Ed degree, combines academic subjects with pedagogic and education courses.

Second level teachers complete a three or four year degree in a specific subject or subjects (e.g. Languages, Arts, Business, Science etc) before taking a one year specialised teacher education course. As at primary level, entry to second level teaching is competitive and in recent years, most second level teachers entering the profession have achieved a high Second Class Honours or First Class Honours degree i.e. they are among the top 35% of their peers. While the profession is becoming increasingly feminised, the differential is not as marked as at primary level. About 25% of those entering second level teaching are male.

The salary scale is the same for all teachers, primary or second level, whether they teach four year olds or 18 year olds. Additional allowances are paid for additional qualifications and for extra duties. Taking account of purchasing power parities, Irish teachers at mid-career are paid above the OECD mean, with salaries comparable to teachers in the US, Japan, Australia and the U.K. Irish teachers' salaries are slightly above the level of GDP per capita.

There is increasing emphasis on continuing professional development for teachers to ensure that they are regularly up-skilled and in touch with changing education trends. In-service courses are available for teachers in all parts of the country. These vary from short (two or three day) State provided courses (usually provided in the context of curriculum change or other innovation) to summer courses (five days duration) provided through local Education Centres, to certificated courses (usually leading to Masters degrees), provided, often on an e-learning basis, by Universities and Colleges of Education. Certificated courses are usually quite demanding in terms of time input. They usually require five or six hours attendance a week during the academic year (usually in the evenings and on Saturdays). Some of these courses are offered on a distance learning basis with some elements taken on a Web-based basis, and are more accessible for teachers than they used to be. A very recent development in some universities has been the provision of taught/professional Doctorate courses for teachers and other professional in the education system – leading to an Ed.D.

It is estimated that almost 50% of primary teachers attend some form of in-service every year. While there was always a tradition among the primary teaching profession of attending in-service courses during the summer vacation, numbers attending these and other courses, especially certificated courses in universities, leading to a Masters degree, has grown in recent years.

A wide range of Support Services are available for schools. These include support services relating to

- School Leadership
- Revised syllabi and curriculum
- whole school planning
- use of technology
- home school community liaison
- School Completion, etc.

Flexible Child-Centred Modern Curriculum:
As mentioned earlier, a new child-centred primary curriculum was introduced in 1971 to replace what had been a rigid subject-centred curriculum. The 1971 curriculum was revised in 1999 and this revised curriculum provided more detailed guidelines for teachers. The 1999 curriculum places a strong emphasis on guided discovery learning and active learning. The child is seen as an active agent in his/her own learning and the teacher is a facilitator of learning. The revised curriculum promotes the active involvement of children in a learning process that is imaginative and stimulating. Its overall vision is to enable children to meet, with self-confidence and assurance, the demands of life, both now and in the future. The curriculum aims to help children to become lifelong learners and to develop the motivation and the skills which will enable them to do so. There is a strong focus on literacy and numeracy while at the same time the Arts, Science and Technology play an important role. Primary classrooms in Ireland are bright, happy places with lots of children's work on display, especially art work. Increasingly, primary schools use new technologies for pupil learning, although a lack of

broadband facilities in many areas of the country militates against quick and easy internet access and communication in some schools, especially in rural areas.

In general, primary teachers in Ireland have been successful in implementing the curriculum guidelines. Reports from schools inspector who carry out a Whole School Evaluation of each school on a five yearly basis, indicate that the programme is being successfully implemented and that the teachers are following the guidelines. These reports are published on the Website of the Department of Education and Science http://www.education.gov.ie, and are accessible to the public.

According to the OECD publication *Education at a Glance*, pupils in Irish schools "are supposed to receive" 7,300 hours instruction time between the ages of 7 and 14. This is above the OECD average of 6,850 hours and is considerably higher than Finland (5,500 hours) and lower than the Netherlands (over 8,000 hours). However, there does not appear to be any international evidence to suggest a correlation between a higher number of instruction hours and pupil achievement.

Whole School Development Planning:
Under recent legislation, each school is required to engage in collaborative whole school planning. The planning process involves a continuous cycle of development and has the potential to enhance pupil outcomes through focusing on teaching and learning, monitoring progress, and enabling schools to build their capacity to manage change. When properly implemented, whole school development planning is one of the most effective tools for whole school improvement. Regular agreed target setting by teachers, and the involvement of teachers in monitoring the attainment of these targets, has been shown to develop a culture of continuous improvement in schools.

Generally speaking, all schools in Ireland are expected to achieve similar learning outcomes. However, there is considerably flexibility in the process and in the approach used by different schools in achieving these outcomes. An outsider visiting a number of Irish schools might well find significant differences in emphasis in different schools. For example, while most schools teach through the medium of the English language a small number of schools teach through the medium of the Irish language. Some schools will use "whole class" teaching methods while others will focus more on group or individualised learning techniques. Some schools place more emphasis on the Arts than others and might use the Arts as a tool for learning.

Whole School Evaluation
Whole-school evaluation (WSE), referred to earlier, is a process of external evaluation of the work of a school carried out by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science (DES). The process is designed "to monitor and assess the quality, economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the education system provided in the state by recognised schools and centres for education".

Whole-school evaluation is a collaborative process involving the teaching staff, the management of the school, parents, and pupils. At various stages during the WSE

process, members of the school community have the opportunity to interact with the evaluation team to discuss their work, their role, and their vision for the school. These interactions provide the evaluation team with an insight into the structure and dynamics of the school.

An Analysis of Educational Reform in Ireland in the past generation

It is clear from analysing developments in Irish education in the past few decades that there is no quick fix for educational problems. Neither is there a "one-size fits all" solution – educational reform must be sensitive to the history and culture of a country and must be appropriate to the traditions and needs of its society.

An analysis of the Irish education system shows that no one factor has been the cause of Ireland's educational success. Rather a number of factors have contributed to the continuous improvement of the system. Investment in infrastructure was a necessary but not sufficient factor in school improvement. The regular and timely gathering and publication of statistics on student participation and student achievement at all levels and their analysis by various sub-categories have been important. In this regard, Ireland's involvement in the OECD PISA studies and the regular publication of statistics in the OECD *Education at a Glance* have enabled Irish policy-makers to judge the relative performance of Irish students and the effectiveness of various interventions, in an international context.

The empowerment of individual schools and teachers and the expectation that they take responsibility for and are accountable for student learning in their school, have also contributed to the success of the system. Setting targets at school level in relation to student enrolments, school completion, pupil attendance and pupil attainment, and regular monitoring of these targets, have all played an important role. Perhaps most important has been the adoption of policies to ensure that the quality of the teaching profession remained high throughout the period – that initial, induction and in-service training was of a high standard, ensuring that teachers remained at the cutting end of new developments in education and that teacher salaries remained competitive in order to attract high achieving students into the profession.

Ireland has not attempted to improve student achievement by legislating for "standards" or by regular testing of pupils, as has been the practice in some other OECD countries. Compulsory and regular pupil testing with an emphasis on publication of results and national league tables has been eschewed by Irish teachers, who have had the support of recent governments. The catch-phrase "A farmer does not fatten his cattle by weighing them regularly" is a phrase often used to ridicule the notion that systematic testing would improve standards. However, as pointed out earlier in this paper, the vast majority of teachers use standardised tests to gauge their pupils' progress against national norms and to diagnose areas of weakness and underachievement.

The first ingredient in addressing educational reform is to carry out a frank and honest appraisal of the system – preferably with the help and support of independent experts. In the case of Ireland, this comprehensive appraisal was carried out under the auspices of

the OECD in 1965. This appraisal then needs to be considered at the highest level – in the case of Ireland, the *Investment in Education* report was discussed by both Houses of the Oireachtas (Parliament) and the educational shortcomings which had been identified were honestly and openly acknowledged.

A decision was then taken by government in the mid 1960s that a new Development Unit (afterwards to become the Policy Unit) would be set up within the Department of Education to advise on future educational reform and developments, and government also agreed that considerable investment would be required if the Irish education system was to be brought up to international standards. In order to level the playing field between the rich and the poor, school fees were abolished at second level and a scholarship scheme was introduced at third level. Ultimately, fees were also abolished at third level. Priority was given initially to building up the educational infrastructure at all levels and to ensuring that a sufficient number of trained teachers would be available for the rapidly growing school population. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s when partly due to the world oil crisis, financial resources were more limited, that the appropriateness and quality of the education provided was addressed through curriculum reform, at primary and second levels. During this period, a democratic system of individual school management was introduced with teacher and parent involvement on school Boards of Management. Subsequently in the 1990s, this was followed by the building up of the inspectorate; the development and support of high quality school leadership within the system; the introduction of school development planning and whole school evaluation; and the provision of a range of Support services for principals and teachers.

Ongoing vigilance and constant monitoring has been and continues to be essential to maintain progress and to ensure that there will be no slippage of the improvements that have been made.

Challenges in the Decades Ahead:

Ireland faces many challenges in its education system in the decades ahead. Some of these are new challenges e.g. to provide appropriate education for the growing number of immigrant children, many who do not speak English as their first language; to increase the number of children who avail of pre-school education; to increase the number of students completing PhDs. Other challenges facing policy makers relate to maintaining and improving what has been achieved in recent years – high levels of literacy; high levels of student retention to the end of second level; high levels of completion of third level education.

In the recent words of Angel Gurria, OECD Secretary General (quoted at the beginning of this paper): "*Achieving (quality education) requires a strong commitment from everyone, including governments, teachers, parents and students themselves".* This ongoing commitment will be as necessary in Ireland as it will be in Brazil. We are encouraged by our knowledge that educational reform can be and has been successful in many countries throughout the world and with determination and investment, educational reform can be successfully undertaken in Brazil in the years ahead.