

Your Education System

An invitation to participate
in creating a shared vision
for Irish Education into the future

January 2004



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Design by Metaphor

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WHY WE WANT TO HEAR YOUR VIEWS

Most people will agree that the education system we have at is of a very high standard. It's a great credit to the dedication and enthusiasm of all those who deliver this vital public service.

The quality of our education system has remained high because we have developed it down through the decades. Among the most prominent changes are the introductions of the VEC system, free second-level education and the expansion of third-level, which laid the foundation for our unprecedented economic development in the 1990s. Much has changed in Irish society and in Irish schools since those changes – and since the most recent overall reviews of education policy in the Green Paper (*Education for a Changing World*), the National Education Convention, and the White Paper (*Charting Our Education Future*) between 1992 and 1995.

To keep up with a fast-changing world, we need to continue adapting our education system. What was ideal today may be less than ideal for tomorrow. Our present system was not devised for an era when students are often in their mid-20s before their formal education is complete. Nor was it meant to handle the all-pervasive Information and Communications Technology. And what about the threat to our continued competitiveness in the international marketplace? Not to mention the fundamental shift in the values of our society. Those four examples are reasons enough to review and change the system.

In education, change takes a relatively long time to take effect. This is why we must now prepare for the challenges that will confront us 10 years or 20 years from now.

This document begins a national process of consultation around the future shape of education. This process is grounded in the fundamental belief that education is the property of the Irish people as a whole. It is not the property of any Government, any Minister, any Department or any interest group. For this reason the paper does not set out to be prescriptive or to give definite answers to the many issues which face us. On the contrary, its purpose is to set out some major issues and to invite public debate. Thus it is being left open to others to add to the issues to be discussed and to enrich the debate. The process of public consultation, which will run during 2004, will be structured to maximise opportunities for people around the country to participate. It will involve regional public meetings, meetings focused on particular topics and a public attitudinal survey. Quite simply, my intention is to provide every opportunity for each individual to contribute his or her views. It is my hope that we can produce a shared view, or national consensus, to form a backdrop against which future policy can be developed.

I don't expect you, the reader, to agree with everything on these pages. It's simply not meant to be that kind of document. Just to emphasise its unfinished nature, we have purposely left a good deal of blank space – for you to fill in. This is a work in progress. We need your help to complete it.

**Noel Dempsey, T.D.,
Minister for Education and Science**

INTRODUCTION

This document is the first step in a process of consultation. As such it is not an end in itself and does not attempt to offer answers to the big questions. What it seeks to do is to present these questions as openly and fairly as possible.

The level and intensity of public debate and ultimately of consensus will be the test of both the document and the process.

There are many ways of framing policy. Civil Service departments can look within themselves and produce policy proposals for Ministers and Government. Policy can also emanate from discussions with those groups and organisations most closely involved in the delivery of a service. Finally, policy-makers can listen to the views and opinions of as many as are prepared to offer them and use this wider consensus as a backdrop against which to frame policy.

This process is about listening to views and seeking that consensus.

SOME ISSUES

In general, we have been well served by our education system and by the support which it has received from families, communities and society. However, this should not give rise to complacency. It is not enough to stand still. There is a continuing need to identify issues with frankness and to seek improvement. Some of these issues include:

- Increasing the level of **investment** in education in the years ahead and getting full value for this
- the need to have agreement on how the **costs** of a person's education are shared
- the relationship between **socioeconomic** background, how well pupils do at school and participation in higher education
- the need to maintain and improve our **competitiveness** as a country
- the suitability of **curricula** and learning and **teaching** methods to serve the needs of all students
- the number of pupils who do not acquire basic **literacy** and **numeracy** skills
- coping with **indiscipline** to allow all students to engage with learning
- improving **special** educational facilities
- the limitations of our system of **examinations**
- **failure** and non-completion/attrition rates in third-level institutions
- the best way to **empower** parents and learners
- a low level of participation in **adult/community** education
- limited support for **life-long** learning before and after the period of formal schooling

SOME KEY CONCEPTS

To go about all this the right way, we need to identify some key concepts as the basis for decisions about the future of education. There are many such concepts; here are five to be going on with. We'll have more as the process of public consultation goes on:

EDUCATION SERVES MANY GOALS. Perhaps the most basic of all goals is to support the development of the individual. However, education also strives to achieve other goals ranging from the economic, to the social, to the religious, to the cultural.

DISCUSSION

Educational priorities vary from culture to culture and from time to time. Even within any society at any given time, several viewpoints are likely to exist on what goals are most important. Treating all goals as being equally deserving of resources and funding may not be the best way to allocate resources. There would probably be general agreement that goals should definitely include the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and communication, as well as the ability to apply knowledge in a variety of situations to solve problems. But other skills, including work-related skills are essential for life in a changing environment. So too are the skills needed to form and sustain relationships, to contribute to building communities, to be a parent, and to deal with the stresses of modern living.

EDUCATION SHOULD MEET THE DIFFERING NEEDS OF ALL LEARNERS. More young people with varying needs are staying on longer in school and college. Young people with special needs are participating more and more in mainstream education. We also have to consider young people from a great variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, not to mention adults returning to education.

DISCUSSION

Some argue that the education system is too concerned with sorting learners by their level of achievement. An alternative view is that the system should respond to the individual needs, aptitudes and interests of all learners. If the needs of all are to be met, we must also provide for education outside the formal system, especially for learners who experience difficulties in it.

LEARNING IS A LIFE-LONG PROCESS. Learning begins long before a child goes to school and continues outside the classroom, lecture hall and workshop. Especially in times of rapid change, we all need to be life-long learners. To facilitate this, our education system must be flexible, and should take account not only of learning in schools and colleges but also of the learning that happens in communities, in the home and in the workplace.

DISCUSSION

The formal education system must recognise and support learning outside it. We must consider how best to support this. For one thing, learners need to acquire the skills at school that will allow them to make the most of learning opportunities at home and in the community through travel, reading, the media and the internet. In short, formal education must pass on skills for learning outside school and college.

EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT FOR EQUALITY. Education changes lives. It can make the difference between work and unemployment, poverty and comfort. It is important that the benefits of education are equally shared by all and that the circumstances of a child's birth do not determine his or her life chances.

DISCUSSION

Some people get more out of education than others. In a way this is not surprising as people learn differently. However, problems arise when the people who get the least out of education are those who need it most. The stark fact is that children in areas of disadvantage do less well at school, drop out of school earlier, and are less likely to go on to third-level. Nobody pretends that there are quick-fix solutions to this problem and we must ask whether we are spending enough of our available resources on tackling educational disadvantage. This raises hard questions about our priorities. The easy answer is to suggest that we spend more. What is more difficult is to agree how we might redistribute what we're spending at the moment.

EDUCATION SHOULD PREPARE LEARNERS FOR A CHANGING AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE. A major challenge facing education is to prepare our young people to live in a world that is changing rapidly, not just as workers and passive consumers but as individuals who will want to participate fully in society.

DISCUSSION

Employers tell us that children will, as adults, have jobs that have not yet been invented. Technology is already changing the way we do business, the way we communicate, the way we access information. Education must not only prepare children and young people for the changes ahead but must be ready to support adults and communities in this new future. What should be emphasised in this preparation? Consider for example – the development of personal values and principles; building on the strength of traditions and communities; becoming an informed consumer; becoming an active citizen; shaping a more just and equitable society. How big a role should education have in all of those aspects of life?



Concepts are tools that can help us in shaping the future. The next section of this document introduces a number of topics, gives some food for thought and invites you, the reader, to reflect and contribute. There is a lot of blank space in the document – purposely so, because it is not finished until we have your contribution.

"Many of today's children will work in jobs that haven't been invented ..."

"Lots of people will have more than one career ..."

"a learning network of centres, families, libraries and media ..."

"We think we know what to learn, do we know how we learn?"

"How do we make Ireland a knowledge based society?"

SCHOOL

For most of us, thinking about education means thinking about schools. Schooling as we know it has only been with us for over 150 years or so. Much has changed since the first schools were established, but in some ways the model of schooling has changed little. Schools are still seen as places where pupils are grouped by age, sit at desks and are taught by one teacher at the top of the classroom. This is how we imagine schools to be. But what of the future? Can the traditional model last for much longer?

DISCUSSION

An OECD (www.oecd.org) project looked at how schools might be organised in the future and came up with some interesting options. It considered whether schools should have more opportunities to innovate and experiment with how learning is organised and whether they should place a greater emphasis on connecting with local communities and working with them to support the development of value systems. The school of the future may be one that is not so much confined to a single building but is more a learning network of centres, families, libraries and media. This raises issues of how such schools might be managed and by whom. It also raises issues of how we can make schools and colleges, at all levels, more democratic by involving learners, parents and the community in their management and operation. There are potential benefits here not just for the running of institutions but for developing active citizenship.

TEACHERS

All of our lives have been shaped by the teachers and the other education professionals we came in contact with during our years at school/college. Because of their influence on the lives of their students, teachers have to be of the highest personal calibre. They must be capable of contributing to the development of their communities and society at large. Nobody could possibly disagree with this ideal, but how do we attract to the teaching profession – and then retain – people of this calibre? Just as important, can we set up a workable system whereby those who are unable to meet the demands of the educational environment are supported in finding other work?

DISCUSSION

The work of education professionals is already undergoing transformation, due to several factors. These include the changing contexts for learning, the new expectations that parents/learners have for their education and the greater understanding of how children and adults learn. All of these have implications for how education professionals are prepared for their roles in the education system, how their on-going development is supported during their careers and how they engage with others, both inside and outside the education system. If creativity and ingenuity are to be the hallmarks of the learning society, education professionals must themselves be people of creativity and ingenuity, open to new knowledge and new ideas. Certain characteristics will be more essential than ever in aspiring (and indeed, serving) teachers, such as their ability to interact with children and young people, the commitment/interest they demonstrate, and their engagement with parents and local communities.

LEARNERS

What should children and young people learn at school? This question is at the heart of our education system. What and how we learn at school has implications for all the learning that takes place in other settings and at other times in our lives. In the past, our debates about learning tended to focus on *what* children and young people should learn. More recently, we have started to look at *how* they should learn.

DISCUSSION

Given the pace at which new knowledge and ideas are emerging, we are becoming more and more conscious that the accumulation of knowledge is not enough; knowing how to learn is also very important. Beyond school, in colleges and universities, in adult and community settings and in the workplace, the ability to learn, to investigate, to reflect and research is highly valued. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has specified a set of outcomes for primary and post-primary education (www.ncca.ie). These are kept under review since they change to reflect the changing needs of society. But they also give rise to considerable debate. Should they focus on a broad set of knowledge and skills, the kinds of knowledge and skills associated with school subjects? Others suggest that this broad curriculum, coupled with the kind of examination system we have at present, leads to very superficial learning, with no real chance to develop understanding in any one area.

School subjects are themselves the focus of debate. Are there subjects that should be studied by everyone or should learners have more choice in what they study? Do some subjects take up too much of school time? Some would argue that subjects are an outdated way of organising knowledge and skills, and that we should focus more on competences and inter-disciplinary approaches. The balance between what and how to learn is always contentious, but of late the NCCA has been suggesting that more time should be spent on the how, and less on the what. Learners, too, will have to accept greater responsibility for their learning, responding appropriately to the resources provided, behaving in a disciplined manner and respecting the rights of their peers to learn.

EXAMINATIONS/QUALIFICATIONS

Exams play a big part in the educational experience of most young people. Our existing examinations enjoy a high level of public confidence, but they are also the focus of some concerns. These concerns relate to *what* is examined, *how* it is examined and *when*. Some have criticised the current system for including only a narrow range of knowledge and skills. Other criticisms focus on the fact that for most students the exams are concentrated into a couple of weeks and are mostly written. Having two major examinations at second-level means that many teachers, students and parents feel that this important stage of education is just about exams.

DISCUSSION

At second-level, exams impact on what is taught and, more importantly, how it is taught. If an exam merely tests a young person's ability to remember facts and write them down, then it is likely that teachers will focus on these skills in the classroom. These are important skills, but there are other important skills that may not be assessed in examinations: problem solving, communicating, working with others, the ability to adapt to new situations, how to research, and how to think critically are just some of the competences that may become increasingly important in the knowledge society. How can these be assessed in examinations? Some interesting ideas about the future of the Leaving Certificate examination and the certificate awarded at the end of senior cycle education are being considered by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (www.ncca.ie). The debate about whether or not the Junior Certificate should continue in its present form needs to be resolved. Do we need an examination like this for 15-year-olds or might some other form of assessment be better? If we make changes to the Leaving Certificate examination this will have implications for other examinations, in colleges and universities. Should we change our third-level exams to parallel the much greater openness of our state examinations where marked scripts are now available to students?

The National Framework of Qualifications (www.nqai.ie) launched in October 2003 offers a new way of describing learning achievements at different stages of the education system. A key feature of the framework is its emphasis on access, transfer and progression of learners. In the future it will provide an important support for life-long learning.

BEYOND SCHOOL

With the acceptance of the lifelong nature of education comes debate regarding the length of time people should remain in the formal education system. At present, young people are encouraged (though not obliged) to stay in education beyond the age of 16. Should this period be longer, to take account of more in-depth or broader types of learning? On the other hand, should we stop ignoring the fact that a considerable number of students do not finish their formal schooling – and should we therefore set about changing the system to accommodate them elsewhere or at later stages in their lives?

Learning is not confined to classrooms and lecture halls. Individuals, institutions and agencies, as well as families, make major contributions challenging our traditional image of education. To benefit from the knowledge society, we must look beyond classrooms to see the learning potential in other settings.

DISCUSSION

A strong case can be made for considering alternative opportunities for learning within the formal education system at the post-compulsory stage. These include distance learning, community networks, private provision of education, work experience, forms of apprenticeship, and information technology. Consideration of education generally focuses on schools, colleges and universities. The education that takes place outside these settings is often overlooked, not least by educational institutions themselves. There is considerable research evidence, for example, that the learning that takes place before a child comes to school is of vital importance in determining how well s/he does in the years ahead. It can be argued then, that learners would benefit if greater attention and resources were given to early childhood education before a child begins formal schooling. Equally, adults, who may not have experienced success in school can benefit greatly from adult, community and workplace learning.

It is third-level education that absorbs the greatest per capita amount of resources. Those who do not benefit from education at this level may be those who need these resources most. However, investment in education up to now has not targeted many non-traditional sources of learning. The media, for example, could be an important educational resource for parents, for those wanting to improve basic literacy and numeracy skills, or for community groups. Workplace learning can also be a valuable resource; part-time work by students, properly monitored, might be a valuable part of a young person's education.

QUALITY

Learning should be supported by good feedback. This helps the learner to improve and develop. Likewise if the education system is to develop, we will need to place an emphasis on information and evaluation at all levels. Individual schools, colleges and other centres of education must be accountable to their learners, parents and staff. The question must move from whether or not we give information to how we can provide the most meaningful information.

DISCUSSION

Evaluating education is complex and challenging. A particular challenge is to gather comprehensive information on the quality of schools and other education providers and to make the information available in a way that is accessible to learners, parents and communities. This task is complex for two reasons. Firstly, some of the most valuable outcomes of education are not easily measured, and focusing on only the measurable outcomes (such as examination results) can provide a distorted picture. Secondly, not everyone comes to school or college with the same abilities and the same resources. Different levels of family and community support, socio-economic disadvantage all make a significant difference to how much a child or young person benefits from education. Information gathered on schools and educational institutions will have to take account of these differences. At national level, it will be essential to gather accurate information on the real impact of educational policies, programmes and types of provision and, even more importantly, to act on the outcomes of such reviews and evaluations. If it emerges that elements of the education system are no longer working effectively or that innovations are not having the desired impact, decision-makers will need to be sufficiently flexible and confident to act decisively to provide better alternatives. At school level, procedures should be put in place to guarantee the provision of a quality education for all learners.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

The potential of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to change where we learn, what we learn, and how we learn is only beginning to emerge. In Ireland, we have a particular interest in these developments. As a world leader in the development and production of the technologies that will reshape learning in the 21st century, our education system should lead the way for others in preparing learners for participation in the knowledge society.

DISCUSSION

Much has been done to bring technology to schools and colleges, to libraries and community centres. The next task is to bring it much more into the learning process. Here it has the potential to develop learners' critical thinking skills, communication skills, problem solving skills and the ability to work in a team, all of which are important in the knowledge society. We have only just begun to tap into the potential of ICT as a tool for learning. To continue to unlock this potential, schools and colleges must look at how the learning environment is structured. The classroom of the future may look quite different from the classroom of today. The preparation of teachers and other education professionals will have to place greater emphasis on ICT; if teachers are to facilitate the use of ICT as a learning tool, they should be confident and competent in its use. Teachers and lecturers already working in education should get professional development opportunities to enable them to integrate ICT effectively into their work.

While ICT has tremendous potential in education, it poses three major challenges. The first is to ensure that its use adds to the quality of learning. The second is to ensure that the integration of technology into educational settings does not further disadvantage some learners who may have no access or limited access to ICT at home or in the community. The third is to equip students to avoid being swamped by information overload and to distinguish between the important and the trivial in making best use of this new technology.

FURTHER EDUCATION

Further education has two broad roles. The first is to ensure that the individual is constantly developed throughout his/her life. The second reflects the fact that more than a million of our adults have never gone beyond lower second level in their education. Many have serious literacy and numeracy difficulties. Poor educational attainment is closely related with social exclusion, crime and poverty. Further education has an important role in tackling this.

DISCUSSION

Today's world demands continuous change and adaptation. Much of this is linked to work and we must consider the role employers' play in relation to both the content and funding of further education and training. Young people and adults are seeking assistance with literacy and numeracy, parents want help to support their children's schooling, and people who work in the home or are unemployed want a second-chance education. Further education has a pivotal role to play in the development of the concept of lifelong learning, by providing an opportunity to cater effectively for the wider population which is now seeking to re-enter the education system. Many adult education programmes are designed for low achieving school-leavers and play a central role in empowering them to acquire new skills, leading to enhanced employment opportunities.

HIGHER EDUCATION

The emergence of low-cost economies is threatening jobs in Ireland and we are depending on our institutes of technology and universities to help maintain our competitiveness. Challenges facing all third-level colleges are many: strengthening their links with industry, financing and value for money, enhancing quality on a continuous basis and operating in a more globalised environment while at the same time reaching out more to local communities and widening student access. Access is one issue but there is the related issue of ensuring equity of outcomes at third level. We also have to ask ourselves: are we serious about establishing Ireland as a research-driven economy? If so, are we prepared to give a priority to investment in research capacity?

DISCUSSION

An OECD review was launched by the Minister in August 2003 to evaluate how well our higher education sector is meeting its strategic objectives and will offer recommendations for making further progress. It will examine the role of higher education institutions as centres of education, knowledge and research with reference to their public, social and economic responsibilities. It will also consider the interface between the higher and further education sectors in meeting overall needs. This review will draw on the views of all who have a stake in the quality and responsiveness of our higher education system. Other issues to be faced are access, transfer and progression requirements for lifelong learning; the needs of individual learners for flexible, innovative modes of delivery; the growing international mobility of students, and the over-riding need for quality assurance and quality improvement. A big issue for higher education is to facilitate greater participation by students from seriously disadvantaged backgrounds.

CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITIES

If the school of the future is to look different, it is likely that it will need to be managed differently. Changes in classrooms won't happen unless they are matched by innovative approaches to how schools are managed and organised. We need schools that have close links to the communities they serve.

DISCUSSION

It seems unlikely that the present system of governance for schools and colleges will be able to respond to many of the complex challenges facing education. We need less bureaucracy and centralised control; we need more professionalism, dialogue and local input. As well as participation by parents and other members of the community in school management, other options should be considered such as increased networking between groups of schools, between schools/colleges, industry/business, the professions/trades, and other organisations and agencies. In moving to this more dynamic approach we can build on the strength of the ethos and traditions of institutions as they are transformed into new kinds of educational settings and networks.

PAYING

Money well spent on education is an investment in our future. That said no public service is without cost, and education is no exception. In the final analysis, the decision society makes about the level of educational expenditure will affect everyone either in terms of taxation paid or the ability of the State to fund other services and benefits. It is easy to argue for more expenditure on education, it is more difficult to achieve consensus on priorities.

DISCUSSION

Even when there is consensus about the appropriate level of expenditure on education, there are further questions about how this is allocated across competing priorities within the education sector and how best value is obtained. It is in the nature of schemes and programmes operated by the State that once commenced they are rarely discontinued. This probably reflects the reality that sectoral interest can very often be more powerful than the public interest. A very real challenge facing Irish society in the future is to create and maintain the essential link between what we spend, how we pay for it, and what we get in return.

PUTTING THIS WHOLE EXERCISE IN CONTEXT

Ireland values learning. As a nation we have high regard for education – in schools, in colleges and universities, in families and communities. From the hedge schools of our forebears to the e-learning networks of today, our enthusiasm for learning continues to be one of the defining features of our society.

Our achievements in learning are also valued outside Ireland. Irish ideas and Irish imaginations are at work, bringing the best of Irish learning to a global audience. Many of the world's leading corporations which have chosen to come to Ireland have done so because of the worldwide reputation of our learning and our learners. The teaching profession continues to attract talented and committed people to its ranks and teaching is held in high regard. Many Irish people living and working outside the country return home when the time comes for their children to start school, a reassuring vote of confidence in the system.

This reputation has been many generations in the forging. Long before the founding of our first schools, families and communities worked to nurture and pass on traditions and skills. With the coming of schools to our towns and villages, this process was given a new focus, and the classroom joined the hearth as a place of learning. In difficult times, education was seen as a lifeline and a means of escape from hardship. In better times, it became a passport to success, a source of pride for communities and a key component of Ireland's economic and social development. The advent of free second-level education for all in the 1960s meant that more young people than ever before could access previously unattainable qualifications, opening the gateway to further and higher education. It is no exaggeration to say that this measure fundamentally improved lives.

Outside the walls of classrooms and lecture halls, other learning sites emerged and began to establish a place in the life of the nation. The workplace, libraries and community groups all feature in the development of our learning tradition.

Our commitment to learning, our learning tradition, provides the foundation for our education system. It also ensures that it is under constant scrutiny. It is tempting to treat an education system as successful as ours as a national treasure, beyond criticism. We have not succumbed to that temptation. We have not placed our education system in a glass case; the 1990s were years of review and legislation. Beyond these formal reviews however, education is always under informal review through the discussions of parents, teachers and students,

through the analysis of the media, through the comments and observations of those working outside education. The findings of research add an important dimension to formal and informal review processes.

Some of the challenges faced by the Irish education system are common to education systems across the developed world. Ensuring that the benefits of education are shared equitably, responding to new insights into how people learn best, and making the most of the opportunities offered by information and communications technology – are all shared challenges.

Irish education also faces its own challenges. Twenty years of social and cultural change have re-shaped the educational landscape. New faces, new voices, new cultures, new expectations have all contributed to this changed, and changing, educational environment. New prosperity has brought new poverty and a concern that the benefits of education may be weighted in favour of those who have much and against those who need more. The influence of organised religion, once a pervasive presence in Irish educational and social life, has receded. Irish education, so central in the process of building communities and shaping the priorities and convictions of children and young people, is working in a changed and constantly changing environment.

Translating our passion for learning into a well-resourced equitable high-quality education system is an ongoing challenge. Resourcing the education system – meeting the needs of families and local communities for well-equipped schools, supporting national priorities in research and development, helping colleges and universities remain at the cutting edge of innovation – is an expensive business for a small nation. For a small nation, it is an essential investment. The people of Ireland are Ireland's greatest resource. Over the last number of years, the level of investment in education has increased. It may need to increase further in the years ahead and we must ensure that it is well used and yields the greatest value. Setting the priorities, making the choices, pose a challenge not just for policy-makers and decision-makers, but for all who participate in and benefit from our education system.

Over the coming months, there will be opportunities to think about and talk about these issues and about the challenges faced in educating Ireland in the 21st century. All are invited to participate in the debate. Shaping the future of education in this country cannot be left to the few; it must faithfully reflect the aspirations of all.

