

# Editorial

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The mission of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* is to accurately and fully cover the story of education in Ireland in the given year. The articles in this year's edition, written by leading lights in their sectors, fulfil this purpose for 2022. Since this is the 100th anniversary of the birth of the independent Irish State, it seems important and timely this year that we also reflect on how we have managed Ireland's education system over the past century.

## 100 years ago

The Irish Free State formally came into existence one hundred years ago on 6 December 1922, one year after the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed by the British government and the plenipotentiaries acting on behalf of Dáil Éireann. The subsequent Dáil debate was very contentious, and many have speculated that if a vote had been taken before Christmas that year, the treaty would have been rejected by the Dáil. But following the debate the vote was put off until 7 January 1922.

Otto von Bismarck is credited with the line that 'wars are not won by generals, but by school teachers and parish priests who help shape a country's sense of its own history'. It was to those teachers and clerics that the TDs contemplating their decision on the fate of the treaty returned to spend Christmas and the New Year in 1921/22.

## What were people telling their elected representatives over that festive season?

Exhausted after the bitter War of Independence, many, including the clergy and primary school teachers, urged their local TD to vote to accept the treaty on offer. When the TDs gathered in their temporary location in the Council Chamber of University College Dublin (UCD) in Earlsfort Terrace (now the National Concert Hall), on Saturday 7 January, they voted 64 to 57 to accept the agreement as presented.

When the Dáil reconvened the following Tuesday, Eamon De Valera lost a motion to be re-elected as Dáil president by two votes, after which he and his supporters walked out. Arthur Griffith was then elected as Dáil president. The following day he wrote to Michael Hayes TD, a lecturer in French in UCD, inviting him to become Ireland's first Minister for Education. Thus began Ireland's self-management of its own education system.



**Dr Brian Mooney**  
Editor of Ireland's  
Education Yearbook

## What effect has self-government had on our education system over the past century?

At independence, no changes were made to the administrative system of national education. Curricular reform was introduced in 1922, based on the recommendations of the First National Programme Conference. In 1925, the government set up a committee under the chairmanship of Rev. J. McKenna SJ to review the curriculum, and the report of this committee (known as the Second National Programme Conference) was published in 1926.

To contextualise the Irish education system inherited by the Dáil and Michael Hayes in 1922, it is useful to read the following brief history attached to the *Constitutional Review Group Report* in 1995 written by Áine Hyland:

*When the national school system was set up in 1831, its main object 'was to unite in one system children of different creeds'. The National Board was 'to look with peculiar favour' on applicants for aid for schools jointly managed by Roman Catholics and Protestants. While some of the schools which were taken into connection with the Board in the early years were jointly managed, the main Christian churches put pressure on the government to allow aid to be given to schools under the management of individual churches. This pressure was so effective that by the mid nineteenth century, only 4% of national schools were under mixed management.*

*In terms of the curriculum, the main principle of 19th and early 20th century primary education in Ireland was that schools should offer 'combined moral and literary instruction and separate religious instruction'. While the National Board set down the curriculum for moral and literary instruction, the Patron of each school determined the form and content of religious instruction in the schools under his patronage.*

In the Ireland of the 19th century, Lord Stanley's call for Ireland to establish a school system run by the State to unite in one system children of different creeds was no match for the power of a Catholic Church determined to build a denominational system under its total control.

To suggest in 1922 that a newly established Irish State struggling to survive after a bitter Civil War, and to build a viable democracy out of the ashes of the conflict which had torn the country apart, was going to challenge the Catholic Church's total control of our education system would have been fanciful in the extreme.

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That new government allowed the denominational system they themselves had grown up in to carry on exactly as it was then structured the day they took office. The only role they took on after they took up the administration of our education system was related to curriculum development and the payment of salaries.

## A process of self-reflection

Reflecting in 2022 on how we managed our education system over the first century of our existence as an independent Irish State, I am not seeking to pass any value judgement on the vast majority of those religious and lay teachers who worked tirelessly to educate the children in their care. This is very much an exercise of self-reflection.

I was educated and worked my entire life in the Catholic denominational education system. My maternal grandfather, Daniel Mc Sweeney, graduated from the De La Salle teacher training college in Newtown in Waterford in 1912. He taught from 1913 until his death in 1951 in Ballyseedy National School in Tralee. His two eldest sons, Daniel and Sean, entered the priesthood in Kerry and were integral to the operation of Catholic education in their diocese all their lives.

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Daniel's eldest daughter, Maureen, my mother's twin, entered the Mercy Order in Dublin following graduation from Carysfort College and taught in their schools all her working life. His youngest daughter, Bridie, who sadly passed away this September, followed the same path into Coláiste Íde in Dingle, through Carysfort College, and on to Scoil Eoin Balloonagh in Tralee, where she taught until her retirement in the late 1980s.

The baton has now passed to the next generation of the family, a number of whom are today teaching in our Catholic schools and colleges. Not a day has passed since the Irish State was founded in 1922 when a member of my grandfather's family, including myself for 43 of those hundred years, was not a teacher in the Irish Catholic education system.

## Una voce

It is only in the past 20 years, following the groundbreaking work of the late Mary Rafferty and Betty Purcell, that we have had the courage to drag into the light of day the horrendous consequences of unquestioning acceptance of the system of education managed primarily but not exclusively by the organs of the Catholic Church.

Having myself spent six years (2006–12) as a member of the Education Finance Board (EFB), at the behest of the Oireachtas, seeking to provide remedial educational opportunities to those adults and their extended families who spent their formative years in Ireland's residential care institutions, I am only too aware of the horrors that some religious and lay staff inflicted on the most vulnerable children in schools and care institutions.

I cannot speak highly enough of my fellow members of the EFB who were residents of such institutions and suffered unspeakable abuse at the hands

of people charged with their care, and who worked tirelessly on behalf of their fellow survivors.

Again in 2022 we are reminded of this reality, through the courage and bravery of two brothers who were robbed of their innocence within the grounds and premises of Blackrock College, who told their story in an RTÉ Documentary on One programme in November 2022.

As then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny stated on all our behalf in response to the report on the Catholic diocese of Cloyne in Dáil Éireann, never again can we allow any institution, no matter how prestigious, to be beyond the democratic oversight of the elected representatives of the people.

We have made huge strides in developing Ireland's education system over the first hundred years of our existence, as described in Ireland's Education Yearbook over the years, but we have allowed religious organisations to operate outside democratic oversight, and this has resulted in great harm and suffering to our children. No matter the financial costs, we can never again allow any institution or persons to be beyond question.

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### **NCCA curriculum review framework**

As a society we have been tiptoeing around the issue of the time spent in denominational religious instruction in our schools for years now. Many teachers in our schools are not practising members of any faith community and yet spend time teaching denominational doctrine daily as part of their contractual duties.

In his overview article of early childhood education in the current Yearbook, Mathias Urban describes education as 'the purposeful interaction between adult and child, where learning unfolds in a relationship'. How healthy can it be for the relationship between some of our teachers and their students to be based on a lie, where the teacher daily has to hide their own lack of religious faith from their students?

The Catholic Church might also ask itself how beneficial it is to the faith development of its parishes to have the key sacramental moments in members' lives shaped outside of the parish structures. They might find that parish-based catechesis is a far healthier model of faith formation.

It is only now, in late December 2022, that proposals are being considered by the current Minister for Education, Norma Foley, to address that conundrum that would see primary schools spending more time teaching foreign languages and wellbeing, and less time teaching religion, under planned changes to the curriculum to be introduced under a new framework for what primary school children learn in school.

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A report on the curriculum by the State's advisory body the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has recommended that the time spent teaching religion should be cut from two and a half hours a week to two hours, and that religion would be part of a new curriculum that would include ethical and multi-belief education, in order to give young students a wider perspective on beliefs. A previous change to the teaching of religion, proposed by the NCCA in 2016, was met with resistance from the Catholic Church.

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Other newly proposed changes in the curriculum, reported by my colleague Carl O'Brien in the *Irish Times*, include foreign languages being taught for an hour a week from Third Class onwards; more flexibility to allow schools to focus on priority areas of learning decided by individual schools; greater focus on wellbeing, with three hours a week dedicated to topics such as belonging and resilience; and more emphasis on art, with at least two hours a week on music, drama, dance, film, and digital media.

This proposed framework will allow schools to keep their focus on religious or denominational patrons' programmes, but for a shorter period of the school day. The new plan involved extensive consultation overseen by the NCCA. It will steer the development of a new curriculum that will shape the teaching of young children into the second century of the Irish State's existence.

### Key lesson from the pandemic

If there is one lesson we can take from the pandemic, it is the importance of the relationship between teacher and learner. Mathias Urban refers to it in his overview of early childhood education as he calls again for a publicly funded, child-centred service.

Teresa O'Doherty, in her overview article on primary education, writes that 'relationships are at the heart of education and that learning in community, learning with and from interactions, and engaging socially, are pivotal to the educational experience'. Paul Crone, reviewing second level, states similarly that 'teaching is relational and the importance of the relationship between the student and the teacher is key to learning'.

At further and higher education levels we have seen a huge increase in 2022 in the demands on mental health services, from students who found the remote online learning regime incredibly difficult mentally. A high-quality education can take place only within a trusting, honest, and open relationship between learner and teacher. How we implement this truth in our increasingly digitised world is the challenge for 2023 and beyond.