

# Foreword

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**Norma Foley TD**  
Minister for Education

## Quality and inclusiveness

The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai once wrote that the ‘the windows of a classroom always open / to the future’. This is a line which has always resonated with me, especially so in the months since my appointment as Minister for Education. There is no doubt but that our children and young people, through their experience of education, form some of their first and most long-lasting relationships, develop as thinkers and doers, and spend so much of their young lives.

Thankfully, education in Ireland is both hugely valued and high-quality in nature. As a society, community, and government we recognise the opportunity that education provides for our young people. As Minister for Education I have been entrusted with delivering the government’s commitments on education. I am extremely proud to have that role, but I am only too keenly aware of the responsibility it brings with it.

As a teacher, I am conscious of how important it is for a child or young person to access education in its fullest sense. Access to education can often be the determining factor in securing pathways to professional and other development opportunities, in promoting better life outcomes, and in ensuring fuller access to civic and community life. When something is as important as education, it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that it is fully inclusive of, and accessible to, every learner, irrespective of their background, abilities, and needs. For this to be the case, to my mind, we need structural supports and initiatives to both embrace and empower our students.

Throughout my time as Minister for Education, I have held these values to the forefront of my mind. Close to my heart and also always on my mind are the many, many students it has been my pleasure to teach, the families with whom I have engaged, and the colleagues with whom I have worked. I have also leaned on the learnings each one of us in the education sector garnered throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and in particular the ever-growing consciousness of the daily demands and pressures being placed on the young shoulders of our students.

## New initiatives

As a consequence of these experiences and others, it became abundantly clear to me that the education sector needed to respond, to take decisive action, and to be brave. That is why, since its formation, this government has introduced the largest educational budgets in history and resourced and delivered a range of new and innovative initiatives and policies across both primary and post-primary education.

To name just one initiative, during the last academic year I secured the single largest ever expansion of the DEIS programme. Delivering

Equality of Opportunity in Schools is our flagship initiative to tackle concentrated educational disadvantage. It offers additional resources, including enhanced capitation payments, additional staff, bespoke leadership and development opportunities, and access to Home School Community Liaison and School Completion programmes. The DEIS programme has shown considerable success in improving Ireland's second-level completion rates, which are now the highest in Europe, and in ensuring that students at risk of educational disadvantage are fully supported through the education system. As a consequence of a €180 million investment in the DEIS programme, one in four of our students now benefit from DEIS supports.

The primary pupil-teacher ratio has been successfully reduced by one point in each of the three budgets over which I have presided as Minister for Education, and now stands at a historic low of 23:1.

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education sector who specifically support students with special educational needs.

Significant administrative support has also been introduced for principals, with a new minimum of one release day per week for all teaching principals and automatic administrative status for any primary principal whose school has two or more special classes. In every budget which this government has introduced, there has also been a significant increase in investment in special education, such that there are now 40,000 staff working across the

### Curricular reform

All of this investment and more has also facilitated significant policy developments across the full remit of the Department. One of the most significant policy questions for me as Minister and for the education sector as a whole has been the reform of Ireland's Senior Cycle. This process had been considered for a number of years but took a very significant step forward in spring 2022 with the publication of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) Advisory Report on Senior Cycle and the Department of Education's announcements of the next steps in Ireland's reform process.

The NCCA produced its report after significant research and consultation. The report was based on extensive engagement by the NCCA with so many, including over 120 focus group events, 4,300 submissions through public consultation, and detailed engagement with 50 schools. The report, which represents a comprehensive body of work, provided an important basis for Senior Cycle reform. The NCCA will be very much to the fore as we progress that reform. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) will also be instrumental as we develop new assessment approaches in particular.

In education, our overarching goal in all that we do is to ensure that our students thrive while they are in school and indeed for the rest of their

lives, irrespective of what pathway they might choose to pursue. Certainly, the Leaving Certificate has stood us well since its establishment in the early days of the Irish Republic. It is trusted by students, parents, and broader society. It has allowed Ireland to develop a highly successful, high-skill economy. And yet it is clear that change is needed. One need only take the most cursory of glances to see just how much the world has changed in the last hundred years and indeed to observe the strong pace at which it continues to develop.

Smartphones and the ready availability of Google and broader international flows of people and data have had a significant impact on how we live, work, and socialise. To give just one illustration of this change, consider that the amount of data created and consumed over the last decade alone has increased by 5,000%. Any system that does not evolve, no matter how highly regarded it is, will be overtaken by countries whose system consistently evolves as they prepare students for the ever-changing modern world.

To truly succeed and thrive, our students must be supported to develop transversal skills, to work together in teams, to communicate effectively across a range of media, to easily identify meaningful information, and to demonstrate resilience. In our age of information, in addition to transmitting key knowledge, education must also teach students how to effectively deploy information.

As such, the three tenets of Senior Cycle reform are to:

- empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st century
- enrich the student experience and build on what's strong in our current system
- embed wellbeing and reduce student stress levels.

To realise these ambitions, we are now progressing a wide array of actions, including:

- Every curriculum across Senior Cycle will be redeveloped, updating content and introducing school-based assessment worth 40% in each subject to ensure that students develop a wider range of skills and competences.
  - New subjects will be introduced, providing greater choice for students to better reflect their range of interests and to support the development of a wider range of talents and skills. Two new subjects – Drama, Film, and Theatre Studies; and Climate Action and Sustainable Development – will be ready for students in network schools starting Fifth Year in 2024.
  - Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students have improved access to Mathematics and Modern Foreign Languages from September 2022, broadening the options for LCA.
  - A new qualification will be introduced at levels 1 and 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications to provide an appropriate level of assessment to some students with special educational needs, building on the equivalent programme at Junior Cycle level.
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- A revised Transition Year programme will be established, and greater access to Transition Year for all students will be facilitated.

The programme of work we have set ourselves is ambitious – but it should be, it needs to be, because our young people and our society deserve such ambition. Those in the 1920s who introduced the Leaving Certificate had ambition; those who introduced free second-level education had ambition. Limitless ambition must also be the hallmark of Irish education in the 21st century.

As a teacher, I know that changing curricula and assessment is not easy. So I appreciate that students, teachers, schools, the NCCA, the SEC, and everyone involved will need time and space to find effective ways to innovate in our schools while still maintaining the quality of our students' educational experience.

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It is for this reason I have announced that the subject redevelopment process at Senior Cycle will take place initially in network schools, so that schools and teachers can work with the NCCA and other experts to co-create new curricula and assessment modes. Their expertise and experience will be vital to the programme's success, and I am committed to ensuring that these schools and all other schools are adequately supported to make this key transition to a reformed Senior Cycle.

In addition to these advancements in Senior Cycle, we have furthered a number of initiatives, all designed to ensure that Irish students have the best possible education experience from early childhood right through to adulthood. The promotion of STEM learning in our education system is a key priority for the whole of government. My Department's STEM Education Policy Statement 2017–2026 sets out the ambitious goals and actions required to achieve and improve the STEM education experience and outcomes for all learners from early years to post-primary.

At primary level, it has been over 20 years since the publication of the Primary Curriculum. The NCCA is developing a new Primary Curriculum Framework, which builds on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum while also responding to key challenges that have been identified. Work is also under way on the development of a new Primary Mathematics Curriculum, which aims to further the mathematical proficiency of all learners in our primary schools. I expect the Primary Curriculum Framework to be launched in early 2023, with the new Primary Mathematics Curriculum launching towards the middle of the year.

Following extensive consultation, the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 was published in April 2022. Its vision is to empower schools to harness the opportunities of digital transformation to build digital competence and an effective digital education ecosystem, so as to develop competent, critically engaged, active learners while supporting them to reach their potential and participate fully as global citizens in a digital world. Key to this strategy is

that all learners are given the opportunity to use digital technologies in their learning to reach their full potential, and that they are provided with the digital skills needed for an increasingly digital world.

## Training and development


Significant changes in guidance counselling in schools are also under way. A national policy group has been established to develop a coherent long-term strategic framework for lifelong guidance. A new guidance unit has been established in my Department to oversee and coordinate guidance policy, while a guidance support team has been established in the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). Work is progressing to realise the recommendations set out in the Indecon review of career guidance tools and information, particularly in the area of inclusion, which will be further informed by the ongoing OECD review of Ireland's Skills Strategy.

I am mindful that the quality of our teaching profession is a critical factor in sustaining and enhancing the quality of education outcomes. Teacher education is a continuum, a journey from initial teacher education (ITE) through induction and continuous professional development (CPD). ITE is the first step on this journey and forms the bedrock of a career of lifelong learning. This initial phase of teacher learning plays a key role in determining the quality of learning outcomes for children and young people in our schools.

My Department is currently finalising an ITE policy statement which will present our vision for the ITE sector and how student teachers will be prepared to support all learners in the coming years. Under this new policy statement, we have set out our vision that every student teacher will complete at least one period of professional placement in a special education setting. We have also prioritised the development of a more diverse teaching profession, with clear and attractive pathways for students from all backgrounds.

Of course, this work and indeed all the work which has happened over the past number of years has been possible only because of the immense commitment, dedication, and talent of every person involved in the education sector – including, critically, all those who work in schools and directly with students, as well as those working in our higher education institutions and ITE programmes. I am deeply appreciative of the strong co-operation and leadership which has been shown in every facet of our education system.

Our students stay with us for only a finite period, but their education stays with them for the entirety of their lives. Working in the education sector is, as I have consistently noted, both a gift and a responsibility. W. B. Yeats reminds us that 'education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire'. We in education must acknowledge the gift and embrace the responsibility of continuing to light that fire for the generations of students to come.

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