

# Preparing for the Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Education

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The 2020 Programme for Government states, 'We will establish a Citizens Assembly on the future of education ensuring that the voices of young people and those being educated are central' (Government of Ireland, 2020). In this article, we describe how we might best prepare for the Assembly.

## Introduction

The Citizens' Assembly for Education is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to discuss an issue that is fundamental to our society. The idea for the Assembly arose at a 2018 symposium at the Burren College of Art, 'Towards a More Creative Education System' (Burren College of Art, 2018; Hawkes, 2020). It flowed from a three-day meeting of students, teachers, policymakers, parents, union representatives, artists, and other educators. The deliberative nature of the symposium resulted in a refreshingly honest and open discussion about the nature and purposes of education.

Educational discourse in Ireland can be complex: A lot of people have a lot to say, and all feel, to an extent, that their view is the correct one. All of us, having gone to school, have first-hand experience of the system and tend to have set views on its purpose and operation. In such an environment, there is often little room for people to listen to and hear one another's views in a way that would allow us, as a nation, to reflect on unhelpful aspects of our system and consider how they might be imagined differently, piloted, and reflected upon honestly.

Building on the potential shown at the Burren College of Art in 2018, and the successes of previous Citizens' Assemblies, where deliberation and informed conversations have empowered Irish citizens to think deeply about challenging issues, the government has committed to holding a Citizens' Assembly on the future of education where the voices of those being educated are central.

In May 2022, the Burren College of Art held another symposium – a creative exploration of how to make the Citizens' Assembly on the future of education as effective as possible. Over 60 people, representing all sectors in Irish education, met to consider the following:

- What are the most important questions for the Assembly to address?
- How might the Assembly be designed and hosted?



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- How might the role of young people be best accommodated?
- What might happen before, and after, the Assembly to facilitate its potential to effect change?

## Topics for the Assembly

While familiar issues such as Leaving Certificate reform, school patronage, student and staff well-being, and special education were central to the conversations at the Burren College of Art symposium in 2022, there was consensus that these challenging topics can only be developed meaningfully in the context of broader questions: What is education for? How can our education system contribute to building a successful and sustainable society? By asking big questions about the purposes of education, the Assembly might learn about the values and lived experiences that citizens have with respect to education.

Such a framing will allow us to celebrate what is good in Irish education and to reimagine how our education system meets our collective needs, while cherishing each citizen. It is from this place that necessary conversations about specific education reforms might take place. Care must accordingly be given to the Assembly's terms of reference. Were these terms to focus exclusively on a contentious topic, a narrow, fractious debate may result, with little space given to the bigger issues informing people's perspectives.

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On the other hand, terms of reference that are too 'meta' may fail to focus on the concrete realities of education in Ireland. A middle ground must be found that facilitates the bigger questions and connects these to specific issues of concern for Irish citizens. The processes used to run the Assembly will be key to this.

## The Assembly as a process

A recent article by Professor David Farrell, whose research focuses on Citizens' Assemblies, pointed to the need for care in how they operate, if they are to be impactful (Farrell, 2022). The choice of Assembly chair, the location, and the time given for the Assembly to do its work are all important factors to consider.

Creativity was key to unlocking the collective potential of those who attended the symposia at the Burren College of Art – might it do the same for an Assembly? Might an Assembly meet at schools around the country? Might it be facilitated, rather than 'chaired'? Would universal design for learning ensure a diversity of voices?

If a Citizens' Assembly on the future of education is to breathe life into a system, rather than add to the 'initiative overload' felt by so many working in our education system, then care must be given to how it runs.

## Centring the voice of those being educated

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Young people had a transformative effect on the Burren College of Art symposia. Unfiltered, first-hand accounts of lived experience ensured that conversations were ‘real’ and cut through a lot of the politics that makes many conversations about education so challenging. Care will be needed to ensure that this cohort are given an equal footing in the Assembly.

The Lundy model of participation offers ways for young people to exercise their right to have due weight given to their views. Were an Assembly on the future of education to fully embrace an inclusive approach such as this – rather than adopt a more tokenistic approach to youth participation – then the process and learning could be transformative.

## Preparing for the Assembly

In a written response to a parliamentary question from Labour Party leader Ivana Bacik, dated 22 November 2022, Taoiseach Micheál Martin stated:

*The Government is committed to establishing the next Citizens’ Assemblies, on Drug Use and the Future of Education, at the earliest opportunity following the completion of the assemblies currently underway [Biodiversity Loss and Dublin Local Government].*

*The timelines and terms of reference for the next assemblies will ultimately be a matter for the Oireachtas to agree on. It is anticipated that the Government will consider the matter early in the New Year, following which motions will be put before Dáil and Seanad Éireann for debate, setting out timelines and Terms of Reference for the new assemblies.*

Mindful of this time frame, it is essential that preparatory work begin without delay.

Attendees of the 2022 symposium at the Burren College of Art felt that those tasked with setting up and running the Assembly should hear from a diverse range of voices, using diverse strategies to do so. Care might be given to collect people’s education stories. Schools and their communities might be supported to facilitate conversations about education.

On this point, the successful BEACONS process, run by the Teaching Council to support conversations about education at local community level, could be used across the country (Teaching Council, 2019). Such ‘from the heart’ stories will help the Assembly learn from people’s lived experience of education. As well as these local conversations, the various stakeholders in Irish education would consider the potential of a Citizens’ Assembly through their own internal processes.

In the words of Minister for Education Norma Foley, the Citizens' Assembly on the future of education represents a 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reimagine education and to consider Ireland's education needs' (O'Brien, 2022). For us to make the most of that opportunity, the Citizens' Assembly on the future of education should be a well-informed, inclusive process that celebrates the best of education in Ireland and gives us the prospect of renewal.

With the Assembly fast approaching, now is the time to spark national and local conversations about education – conversations that feed into the Assembly, and flow from it. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for us to talk about the most important investment each of us can make in our lives – our education. Let's embrace it.

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## REFERENCES

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