

Overview of the Second-Level Education Sector in 2022

This overview of second-level education in Ireland looks at the major themes in the sector in 2022. These include wellbeing, student voice, curricular reform, and school patronage and governance. The article asks vital questions about the future of second-level education and the shape it will take in Ireland.



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Introduction

Reflecting on 2022 in Irish post-primary schools, in preparation for writing this article, has re-energised my enthusiasm for teaching. It has reinforced for me that schools are great places, teachers do a great job, we have come far in recent years, and there exists potential at the moment for real and lasting student-centred change in our system.

In his 2005 memoir *Teacher Man*, Frank McCourt describes and reflects on his development as a teacher in New York high schools and colleges. He writes, 'In all my years at Stuyvesant only one parent, a mother, asked if her son was enjoying school. I said yes. He seemed to be enjoying himself. She smiled, stood up, said, Thank you, and left. One parent in all those years.'

Frank taught in Stuyvesant from 1972 up until 1987, and it is very interesting as we reflect on the past year in Irish education to examine our 2022 education environment in the context of Frank's experiences from 35 years ago. Was this mother's question so far removed from our current expectations for our students? Was her ambition for her son in some way unreasonable or frivolous? Would we in 2022 find this request strange? My reflections below point to the significant increase in our current focus on the students' lived experience in our schools and how our attitudes and actions in 2022 clearly support the student.

Wellbeing

As we emerge post-pandemic to engage in the new normality of Irish education, we note with interest that some of the greatest educational thinkers of our time, including Andy Hargreaves, Pasi Sahlberg, and John Hattie, have been writing in detail about wellbeing and the importance of wellbeing to educational success. There is a recognition that schools have responsibilities beyond the imparting of knowledge. Indeed, John Hattie describes wellbeing as the responsibility of everyone in the school community.

Wellbeing is high on the agenda in every post-primary school in 2022. Between providing 400 timetabled hours of Wellbeing, the never-ending discussions on what constitutes wellbeing, and the increasing desire to meet the emerging social and emotional needs of students, wellbeing is at the top of the agenda for every teacher and school leader alike.

When you meet a teacher in a social situation for the first time, it seems polite to ask them what they teach. The reply is invariably Maths, History, or some other curricular subject, when in fact the correct answer is 'students'. All teachers teach students. Teaching is relational, and the teacher–student relationship is key to learning. That has never been more evident than in the 2022 classroom, as we embed the key skills of Junior Cycle and record achievements in the classroom and in other areas of learning on the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement.

The very reason for the existence of schools is to meet the needs of our students, to cater for their academic, social, pastoral, and emotional needs. In 2022, for the first time, students in all subjects have experienced the new Junior Cycle curriculum in action. Initial reactions from a University of Limerick longitudinal study are that the students like the new Junior Cycle and their new-found involvement in their own learning (McGarr et al., 2022).

Student voice

A key development in Irish education that has grown during recent years is the articulation of the student voice. We have had student councils for many years, but did we really listen to the students? That all changed when the Minister listened to the student voice on implementing the State exams in 2021. The Leaving Certificate was run in the best interest of the students as articulated by the students, and not what the system thought was best for them.

As we await the publication of the Parent and Student Charter, it is clear that the student voice will be silent no longer. Students are routinely consulted by their teachers in the classroom in relation to learning outcomes, and students are encouraged to engage in self-directed learning and to take control of their own learning journey. They have been awoken, and they are more than capable and willing to use their voice.

This, I would argue, is a real, positive move for our system. As students become more self-directed and take more responsibility for their learning, they will speak up and will challenge their environment in a positive way to develop their understanding and their learning. They become more aware of their strengths and challenges. They know their own mind, they have something to say, and we need to be ready to listen. It is great to see student representation on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), another milestone development and evidence that the student voice is central to shaping the future development of our education system.

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Senior Cycle

I reflect on the closing days in March and the excitement of an announcement on Senior Cycle reform, which promises to deliver a Senior Cycle that builds on the student learning from early years into the primary school curriculum and on to Junior Cycle. We are at the beginning of something exciting, an evolutionary change that recognises the modern student of 2022. The key reforms announced for Senior Cycle have the potential to have the single greatest impact on our system and for our students.

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The Leaving Cert has served us well, to a point, and while it is clear that terminal exams will have an important role in the assessment processes at the end of Senior Cycle, it is equally clear that alternative assessment modes will be used. The rationale for this has been clearly communicated, and it is to recognise the students and their many talents and strengths, and to give them every chance of success. This is as it should be. The student must be at the centre of all we do, how we do it, and what we aim to achieve. All-or-nothing terminal exams are no longer seen as in the best interest of students. We eagerly await the next steps to bring this vision for Senior Cycle to fruition.

What will Senior Cycle assessment look like? Will we need sample papers? How will students get their place in higher education? How will the CAO work? Of course the answers to these questions will all need to be worked out. As has become normal practice in 2022, consultation with stakeholders is the key, and the student voice will play a really important role in deciding the direction and distance of travel for Senior Cycle reform post-2022.

More important questions for us to reflect on, to prepare for future discussions, are: What do we want from our Senior Cycle? And what do students need from their Senior Cycle? When we know the answers to these questions, which will be achieved through professional dialogue and debate among stakeholders, consensus and clarity will emerge among decision-makers, which will ensure that the new Senior Cycle is student-centred and builds on students' previous experiences.

Junior Cycle

Learnings from the Junior Cycle must have an elevated role in our decision-making, and we must listen to the students. On the morning the Junior Cycle results were released by the State Examinations Commission in November 2022, a number of students from Firhouse Community College were interviewed on Morning Ireland. Their responses were very interesting. They spoke about how they had forgotten about the Junior Cycle results and were continuing with their Senior Cycle subjects. It came across that they had moved on.

Interestingly, some said they had forgotten about the results but that on results day they were anxious and worried about them. They shouldn't be. They should not feel judged or that their worth is questioned by their performance in low-stakes exams. How is that building their confidence and their self-esteem, when they already have their eyes on the next prize? This student feedback must shape our thinking for the future direction of our Senior Cycle, to ensure there is continuity of thought between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle.

In 2022, it is fair to say that schools truly endeavour to put students at the centre of all they do. However, recent revelations following a radio documentary have shocked many post-primary schools. Current child safeguarding procedures operate to protect students, keep them safe, and give them every opportunity to fulfil their full potential in school. The current procedures and oversight give us confidence that these historic issues of abuse would not happen in our schools in 2022.

Governance, patronage, and ethos

The recent chief inspector's report, however, does highlight a significant area of school governance to address going forward. The operation of boards of management in a voluntary capacity is unlikely to be sustainable into the future, he has written. This serious concern requires action and will dominate stakeholder engagement in future years. Central to this debate for 2022 are questions about the role of students in the management of schools: Should students have representation on boards of management? How can the student voice be placed on a statutory footing?

“ The operation of boards of management in a voluntary capacity is unlikely to be sustainable into the future, writes the chief inspector in his recent report.

Closely aligned to the governance of schools is the role of the school patron and the school ethos. We operate three sectors at post-primary level, with different patronage models. All students follow a national curriculum, working towards national certification in the Leaving Cert. I think it is fair to say that the common curriculum and national certification are unlikely to change in the new Senior Cycle. But is the student experience different in schools with different patrons?

This question relates back to the ethos of the school. At the recent launch of Education and Training Boards Ireland's (ETBI) Patrons' Framework on Ethos, Professor Anne Looney, dean of education in DCU, spoke of the children's song that is regularly sung on buses: 'Everywhere we go / People always ask us / Who we are / And where do we come from.' The significance of this song cannot be overestimated in schools in 2022. It speaks to connectedness, a sense of belonging, and an intense pride in your community or school.

Surely this sense of belonging and connectedness is central to the ethos of every school? It brings us back to the relational point: seeing the person

that is the student, putting the student at the centre of everything we do in schools, giving them opportunities to succeed, and being the wind beneath their wings. The ethos of the school must wrap around the student to support their learning regardless of school type or patronage.

Teaching in 2022 is very different from teaching in 1987, and this brings me back to Frank McCourt's experience teaching in New York compared to our current experience. It is my belief that in 2022 students enjoy school, they embrace the challenges in school, and there is a very different student-teacher relationship. The student is a valued stakeholder in 2022 and is actively involved in directing their own learning. We saw this when students didn't want to stay home despite rising cases of Covid-19 in December 2021. Students wanted to go to school because they enjoy school. This is a big positive for Irish education in 2022, and we should be proud that this is our direction of travel.

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