

# Overview of the Second-Level Education Sector in 2023

## Introduction

With the benefit of hindsight some years from now, I wonder how we will judge 2023. Will we look back on it as the year that we laid the strong foundations for our innovative and creative education system of the future? Or will we reflect on missed opportunities that we allowed to slip away from us?

2023 has been the year when our lives returned to a new normal post-pandemic. We are back travelling in greater numbers than before, traffic levels are worse than ever, but as a society our priorities have changed. We are re-evaluating our life priorities and pursuing our passions, and we are working to live rather than living to work.

In light of these changes, I would argue that there is a growing consensus in 2023 that our education system is no longer fit for purpose for future generations. In this article, I will explore how our post-primary education system can try, and is trying, to respond to these new demands and where our challenges lie at the end of 2023.

## Context

I was in the lucky position of attending the European School Heads Association conference this year, where school leaders from 26 European countries gathered for three days to explore school leadership in a European context. With a range of keynote speakers and workshops, the highlight of the conference was the school visits. We got the opportunity to walk around schools, visit classrooms, and speak to principals, teachers, and students. As we explored common concerns, it became evident that in Ireland we are very quick to highlight the things that are wrong or need to change and how difficult the job is. This is not the case among our European colleagues.



**Paul Crone**

Director, National Association of Principals and Deputies

---

**This overview of second-level education in Ireland explores the major themes, developments, and challenges in the sector in 2023. These include curricular change, student voice, inclusion, inertia, and artificial intelligence. It assesses our progress in relation to our European peers and takes a hopeful view of the immediate future.**

---

I was, however, a little surprised when school leaders from across Europe expressed a desire to visit Irish schools to explore, and I quote, how we have 'mastered school leadership'. The Irish system is held in high regard, and I was surprised that our colleagues abroad are looking to Ireland as an exemplar of best practice on the operation of schools and the delivery of effective school leadership. This experience put in context for me that sometimes we need to value what we already have. There are always improvements we can make, but our starting point for 2023 must be one of acknowledging how comparatively well we are doing in Ireland.

I will mention but not dwell on the teacher supply crisis. This is clearly an issue throughout Europe, and, while it is not popular to say so in Ireland, we are in a much better position than many of our European colleagues. We continue to produce high-quality teachers, our Department of Education is working with stakeholders to try to respond to the crisis, and we are starting to see small signs of improvement.

So what are the big-ticket items that catapulted Ireland onto the European stage in 2023?

## Inclusion

Inclusion is an area that has taken significant strides forward during the last year. Not only in the increase in the number of special classes that have opened in post-primary schools, but in the attitudinal shift as we have moved from a desire for mere integration to genuine inclusion. I am not suggesting that the work is complete, but there is a genuine openness and desire for inclusion in our schools. My recent visits to schools in other jurisdictions confirm that Ireland is at a more advanced stage. Our schools are inclusive; we embrace diversity and support all students.

When I speak of inclusion I am referring to its wider definition, which includes special educational needs, international students, LGBTQI+ students, and minority groups in Irish society. Our schools endeavour to meet the needs of all students as best they can.

## Curricular change

Over the past number of years in Ireland, we have been involved with curricular change at Junior Cycle. This is currently being evaluated by the team in the University of Limerick and was recently evaluated by the Inspectorate. Many positives and challenges have been identified, but we must remind ourselves that this is our journey and we must continue to strive for improvement.

---

*I was a little surprised when school leaders from across Europe expressed a desire to visit Irish schools to explore - I quote - how we have 'mastered school leadership'.*

---

Senior Cycle reform gathered momentum in 2023. Its roll-out has been expedited, and there appears to be a determination to deliver meaningful change to the curriculum content, to teaching methodologies, and to assessment practices. These changes will bring Senior Cycle in line with Junior Cycle, the primary curriculum, and the early years curriculum. The aspiration to put students at the centre of what we do in schools is evident in all of our curricular innovations and promises to deliver for our senior students.

## Oide

The birth of Oide in 2023, integrating the support services for schools, has the potential to significantly enhance supports to schools, school leaders, and teachers. Oide is the amalgamation of the previously independent services of the Professional Development Service for Teachers, Junior Cycle for Teachers, National Induction Programme for Teachers, and Centre for School Leadership.

---

*The establishment of the student participation unit in the Department of Education is testament to the commitment of policymakers to ensure the students have a platform to use their voice effectively in their own best interest.*

---

The integration and coordination of services and supports for schools promises to raise standards in teacher and leader professional learning, while embedding professional development throughout the full career of teachers. This potential will be realised and evaluated in future years through our ability to respond to the emerging needs of our students.

## Student participation

In 2023 we have seen the growth in our students' confidence and their ability and willingness to not only be involved in but also take responsibility for their own learning. The students have found their voice and are very capable of using it. The establishment of the student participation unit in the Department of Education is testament to the commitment of policymakers to ensure the students have a platform to use their voice effectively in their own best interest. This is ground-breaking in the European context and is something we should be extremely proud of.

Education is a journey, not a destination. Acknowledging this and the many things that we are doing well, in order to keep moving forward we need to learn to look around corners for the challenges we will meet. These challenges could hold us back or even prevent progress. I will outline some of them.

## Inertia

At this point on our journey of change, our greatest enemy is inertia. What I mean is that when we are at the initial stages of any change initiative, there is a focus on ensuring its success: getting an early win to prove the worth of the

change. In the pilot phase there is often additional resourcing to ensure the success of a change initiative. For example, network schools for Junior Cycle were well resourced and supported as they piloted new subjects. When we pass this initial phase and the initiative is implemented universally, it becomes more difficult to maintain the intensive levels of support to all schools, so we slowly return to the way we did things before. This is the inertia of returning to what we are most comfortable and familiar with and where we feel safe.

To avoid this inertia, a clear focus must be kept on the change initiative to remind us of the reasons for the change, to reinforce its benefits, and there must be continuous support on the improvement journey. This can prove difficult in a large system with a lot of moving parts that require intensive support in specific areas at different times. Moving forward, we must acknowledge inertia and the threat it poses to undermine the excellent work done. More importantly, we must take the necessary steps to avoid it.

## Assessment

Is the Leaving Certificate really fit for purpose for 21st-century students? The growing consensus is that it is not. The chief executive of the State Examination Commission (SEC), when asked recently for her highest aspiration for Senior Cycle reform, replied that the Leaving Cert is seen as 'brutal but fair', adding that she would like to 'remove the brutal but keep the fair'. I think we can all concur with her desire.

There are significant challenges for us here, such as how students are selected for places in higher education. Using the points race as the sole means of entry to higher education is stifling for Leaving Cert reform. In addition, the grinds culture embeds inequality, while changes to implement creative assessment practices that may require input from teachers could prove challenging. To implement meaningful change, these issues need to be addressed, which will involve significant collaboration with stakeholders.

## Artificial intelligence

The advent of ChatGPT and generative artificial intelligence (AI) has already stalled progress on Senior Cycle reform while we await the review from the SEC. How AI may impact on classroom practices remains a cause for concern at this stage. We have decisions to make: Do we, or even can we, ban AI? Or do we need to find a way to incorporate and embrace it? The SEC has taken the latter view, and clarity is required on our systemic response to AI moving forward.

---

*Using the points race as the sole means of entry to higher education is stifling for Leaving Cert reform.*

---

## Conclusion

In some sense, in 2023 what was clear is no longer clear. Our national obsession with education as the key to future success is as relevant today as it ever was. But our obsession with the Leaving Cert as it stands needs to be examined. We as a society need to decide what it is we want from our education system. What do our students need from participation in education? Who do we want to run our schools? And how should we manage our schools?

The programme for government promises a Citizens Assembly on the Future of Education, provisionally planned for the first half of 2024. This offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put a spotlight on our education system, come to a national and collective consensus to give a mandate to policymakers, and continue our journey as educational leaders throughout Europe.

I look forward to welcoming many European colleagues to Ireland over the next year, and I cherish the opportunity to showcase the best of our Irish system to them. I am excited at the prospect that we are on the cusp of significant change that is positive, proactive, and innovative. And I look forward to looking back on 2023 as the year we laid the cornerstone for the future of Irish education.

---

## REFERENCES

Department of Education and Skills (2019) *CUMASÚ: Empowering through learning. Action Plan for Education 2019*. Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Education (2023a) *Department of Education Statement of Strategy 2023–2025*. Dublin: Government publications. [www.gov.ie/en/publication/d7691-department-of-education-statement-of-strategy-2023-2025/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d7691-department-of-education-statement-of-strategy-2023-2025/).

Department of Education (2023b) 'Senior Cycle redevelopment: What it means for me'. Dublin: Government publications. [www.gov.ie/en/publication/45b09-senior-cycle-redevelopment-what-does-this-mean-for-me/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/45b09-senior-cycle-redevelopment-what-does-this-mean-for-me/).

Department of Education Inspectorate (2022) *Chief Inspector's Report: September 2016 – December 2020*. Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2023) 'What Subject Inspections tell us about Junior Cycle implementation'. September. Dublin: Government publications.

McGarr, O., Mc Cormack, O., O'Reilly, J., Lynch, R., Power, J., Ó Gallchóir, C., . . . and Goos, M. (2022) *Exploring the introduction of the framework for Junior Cycle: A longitudinal study Introductory report*. University of Limerick. <https://hdl.handle.net/10344/11185>.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2017) *The Learner Voice Research Study: Research Report*. Dublin: NCCA. <https://ncca.ie/media/3442/16539-ncca-the-learner-voice-research-study-v2.pdf>.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2022) *Background paper and brief for the review and revision of the Transition Year Programme Statement*. Dublin: NCCA. <https://ncca.ie/en/resources/background-paper-and-brief-for-the-review-and-revision-of-the-transition-year-programme-statement/>.