

It Starts with You: Student Participation in the Department of Education

Introduction

Children and young people's involvement in decision-making is both a human right and an essential factor in creating better policies and services. When the views of children and young people are at the centre of decision-making, the outcomes are more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable, and better aligned with their needs and experiences. Involving children meaningfully in decision-making improves outcomes for them and for society.

The Department of Education recognises and values deeply the involvement of children and young people and has set a deliberate strategy to engage and consult with them and to improve and build on its work in this area. The *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying Implementation Plan 2023–2027*, published in 2023, committed to establishing a dedicated unit to promote their voice and ensure they have meaningful input into department policies.

A Student Participation Unit was established in April 2023. The Minister then established an expert group to advise the department on how to improve its work on involving children and young people in its policy development and on embedding a culture of participation in policymaking across the department.

The expert group was chaired by Professor Laura Lundy and included department officials along with experts from the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; Hub na nÓg; National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; National Parents Council; Ombudsman for Children's Office; experts in children's rights; and student representatives from the Irish Second-Level Students' Union.



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The Department of Education has set a deliberate strategy to engage and consult with children and young people. The voice and influence they have had reflects the department's dedication to embedding a culture of participation in policymaking. This article follows the journey from an initial commitment in Cineáltas, to a dedicated Student Participation Unit, and publication of an expert-group report and implementation plan on student participation.

Expert group on student participation

The expert group reviewed how the department currently meets its obligations, including under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (2015–2020), and National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (2021).

Assessing existing structures, systems, processes, and practices across the department, the expert group found evidence of both good practice and areas that need further development. It considered national and international best practice and relevant research. National and international experts were invited to share insights on the participation of children and young people in policy and decision-making in education.



Professor Lundy and members of the child advisory group from St Ciaran's NS, Baylin, Athlone, during a panel discussion at the Department of Education in October 2024.

Consulting with children and young people

The expert group oversaw an extensive consultation with children and young people from diverse backgrounds and education settings. From November 2023 to February 2024 it oversaw a programme of online consultation, large in-person focus groups, and in-school engagements in primary school with a special class, a special school, alternative education settings (including temporary education provision for Ukrainian young people), a Gaelscoil, and an

all-girls post-primary school offering a support programme for Traveller and Roma young people, known as the STAR programme.

The methodology used was based on the child rights model of participation developed by Professor Lundy (the 'Lundy model'). A child advisory group and youth advisory group guided the approach.

The focus group discussions with the children and young people explored:

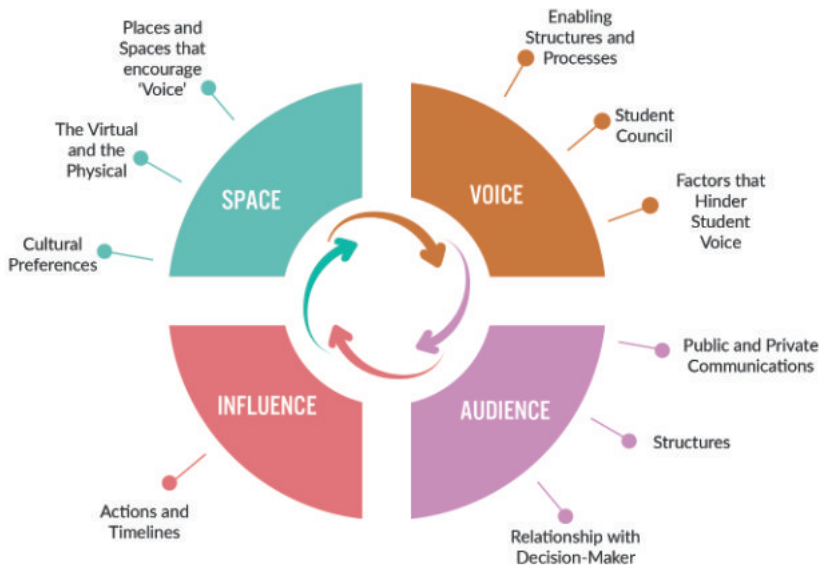
- » their preferred ways of offering their viewpoints to the department (Space)
- » how they could be supported to give those views (Voice)
- » how they would know that their views have been listened to (Audience)
- » how they would know that their views have been acted upon by the department (Influence).

The advisory groups also discussed the findings from the consultations, gave feedback on recommendations and on the report of the expert group, and advised on implementing the recommendations.

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Findings from consultations

Ten themes emerged from the data collected. These were grouped under the Lundy Model's four areas. Below are some examples of what the children suggested.



Visual overview of themes within the Lundy Model

Space: Children and young people prefer a variety of ways to express their views, such as virtual, in-person, indoor, and outdoor spaces. Cultural preferences, maturity levels, and socio-economic backgrounds were also highlighted.

Voice: Focus on simple language and diverse methods of expression. Small groups allow drawing, scribe, and Irish Sign Language assistance.

Audience: The presence of the Minister was valued, and a video address was suggested.

Influence: It is important that there are multiple approaches to show children and young people that their views are taken seriously, including a timeline for implementing their ideas and reasons for not implementing ideas.

Recommendations

The five strategic recommendations made by the expert group are that the department:

1. builds on its understanding
2. develops its processes
3. communicates with children and young people
4. promotes good practice
5. holds itself accountable.

Making student participation happen

In October 2024 the department published the Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation, written for easy access by students as rights-holders, and an implementation plan of 50 actions for completion by 2026. Actions include an annual participation plan, provision of training for staff, and a commitment to communicate to children and young people showing how their views have influenced policy.

Conclusion

The Department of Education has been working to enhance its efforts and approaches to child participation, and the expert review and implementation plan are landmarks on this journey. The department aspires to be at the forefront of approaches to engaging with student voice across the world. There is much to be done, but this is matched by commitment and enthusiasm to give due weight to the views and insights of the many children and young people who took part in the consultations that have informed the expert review.

The Department of Education has been working to enhance its efforts and approaches to child participation, and the expert review and implementation plan are landmarks on this journey.

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