

Overview of the Second-Level Education Sector in 2024

Introduction

A quote by American motivational writer William Arthur Ward resonated in the context of Irish education in 2024: 'The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.'

Reflecting on 2024 in Irish education, the winds of change are blowing. There is a sense that we need to keep moving forward, to continually strive to be better, and to build the structures in our system to allow our schools to flourish. We are all part of this system and have a role to play. Every voice is equally important, and it is our responsibility to listen, respond, and take action. However, we all must be the realist and adjust our own sails, with the understanding that all education stakeholders are working together towards the common goal of delivering the world-class education system our students deserve.

Context

2024 marks the hundredth year of the Department of Education. At a commemorative ceremony in the Clock Tower there was genuine acknowledgement of the many achievements to be proud of and some to look back on with regret and shame. There was a clear sense of an emerging vision to help move Irish education forward while remembering and acknowledging legacy issues. There was an evident aspiration towards a new way of collaboration and partnership, with a commitment to putting students at the centre of everything we do. This is refreshing and most welcome.

2024 saw a shift in the Department of Education's engagement with stakeholders, with an increase in the number of working groups, steering groups, and collaborative forums engaged in decision-making for change initiatives. There has been an increase in the frequency of structures to capture the voices of those



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This overview of second-level education in Ireland in 2024 looks at the main issues, developments, and challenges in the sector, providing historical context for the current state of Irish post-primary education. Among the topics addressed are updates to curriculum and guidelines, smartphones, grade inflation, inclusion, and student participation.

invested in our system, coupled with the Department's intention to respond positively whenever it can. This is a clear adjustment of the sails, to respond to new ways of working, and it is building optimism for the future of Irish education.

Missed opportunity

The coalition government's programme included a commitment to hold a Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Education (CAFE). It is regrettable that this did not happen in 2024. This is a missed opportunity to stimulate a national discussion on the collective vision for Irish education, to engage with Irish citizens on what they want from our education system, and to scrutinise things we have long taken for granted, such as the Leaving Certificate, the curriculum, and school patronage.

We must ensure that our education system is innovative, agile, and responsive to the needs of students in the 21st century. A national discussion is essential to bring everyone on this journey to future-proof our system. At the time of writing, there is hope that the Citizens' Assembly will take place in 2025, as these discussions are vital to the continued success of our education system.

Change initiatives

Curricular change continues in the form of Senior Cycle redevelopment, the launch of the tranche 1 subject specifications, the Transition Year specification, and the welcome introduction of the new subjects, Climate Action and Sustainable Development, and Drama, Film, and Theatre Studies. The redevelopment is gaining momentum as more subject specifications are reviewed, and we will see its implementation recommence next year.

Other significant changes have occurred. *Bí Cineáltas*, the new anti-bullying procedures, was launched in June. This new policy document and associated procedures highlight the significant negative impact that bullying can have on students and creates the framework to support schools to tackle it.

The Code of Behaviour guidelines, which have not been updated since 2008, are being reviewed. Updating the guidelines to reflect the changes that have occurred in our schools is timely and most welcome. The final draft is expected shortly.

The report on Out-of-School Education Provision to support students who have not experienced success in their mainstream school is another positive initiative.

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Work on the development of the special needs assistant (SNA) workforce plan will provide a framework for the almost 22,000 SNAs in our schools. Work has also begun, with UNESCO support, on strategic workforce planning for teachers in Ireland. These works will build the foundations for our system, as teachers and SNAs are two of the greatest resources available to our students.

Schoolbooks

A stand-out initiative in 2024 was the provision of free schoolbooks to all Junior Cycle students, with extension to Senior Cycle students announced in October. This is one of the most significant developments since the introduction of free post-primary education in 1967. It is a huge support to parents and delivers on the government commitment to free education. Providing every student with books and stationery means they can engage fully with their learning, and it brings Ireland into line with many of our European counterparts.

The scheme's late implementation did create significant logistical issues at school level and for schoolbook sellers, such as procurement, storage, and administration; these were initially underestimated, yet post-primary schools managed to deliver for their students.

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Smartphones

Smartphones play an important part in the lives of our young adults and indeed ourselves. We have all become reliant on them for connectivity, access to information, navigation, and even simple tasks like telling the time. Yet smartphones are distracting, reduce concentration, decrease interpersonal social interaction, and are central in many incidents of bullying. Teachers anecdotally describe smartphones as the 'scourge of the classroom', the single biggest impediment to deep engagement in classroom activities and learning. 2024 has seen a spotlight placed on smartphones with the announcement of a national ban and the Budget's provision of pouches to every post-primary student. These headline-grabbing initiatives have not been universally welcomed in schools.

Every post-primary school in Ireland has a mobile-phone policy that endeavours to remove the phone from use in school. Development and implementation of the policy is done in partnership with parents and students. These policies work when everyone understands the rationale. Preparing students for the challenges they face in their study, work, and personal lives must be our priority; we need to approach the smartphone from an education perspective and embrace the learning opportunity presented. 2024 has raised more questions than answers about smartphone use in post-primary schools.

Grade inflation

One of the hangovers from Covid-19 has been grade inflation, whereby students' Leaving Cert results have been artificially inflated to compensate for the increased grades given to students when they could not sit the exam and grades were calculated by their teachers. This was seen as essential at the time, and the grades have remained artificially inflated every year since so that one group of students will not be negatively impacted.

This is highlighted when some students with higher grades fail to secure their place in higher education, and it underscores the need to review selection procedures for higher education. These procedures must take into consideration students' aptitudes, abilities, and interests. When admissions procedures are expanded, there will be a reduction in students' anxiety associated with performance in the terminal exam, and grade inflation will cease to be the significant issue it currently is.

Inclusion

A total of 136 additional special classes opened in post-primary schools in 2024. The increased incidence of students with additional educational needs is beginning to impact in schools and is in general being warmly welcomed. There is a move away from mere integration to genuine inclusion, with school communities reporting enriched learning environments as all students are welcomed and their needs met in mainstream school. A consensus has emerged, largely due to the work of the National Council for Special Education, that every school must cater for the educational needs of every student.

Yet challenges remain. The publication of the Behaviour of Concern guidelines, on strategies to support schools to manage difficult behaviours, is a welcome and challenging addition. The publication of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy in August has been positively received, as every student has the right to have their educational needs met in their school.

Student participation

The launch of the student participation unit in the Department of Education is the culmination of a significant body of work over recent years. Embracing students as significant stakeholders is the logical step forward and is key to future-proofing our education system for the next generation. Student involvement is essential for the success of all change initiatives.

This is also being reflected at school level with initiatives such as Student Perspectives On Teaching and Learning In The Educational space (SPOTLITE),

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which embraces the student voice on improving the quality of teaching and learning. These initiatives are quickly becoming more common and are to be complimented.

Conclusion

The old political slogan 'A lot done, more to do' is equally relevant to education in 2024. There has been a lot of change, initiatives, and discussion. As I reflect on where schools stand in 2024, it is timely that we start to view them as more than just a collection of classrooms. They are complex organisations, public bodies subject to the scrutiny of any small to medium enterprise. Schools need to be resourced appropriately; this includes being funded to provide the best service to their students, staffed to deliver on their administrative and compliance obligations, and resourced to be able to prioritise their core work of delivering excellence in teaching and in-depth learning for their students.

The winds of change are blowing, and we are adjusting the sails. They are not yet fully adjusted, but there is a feeling of optimism that we are going in the right direction.

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