

# Review of reporting practices in Irish post-primary schools

## 1.1 Introduction

In order to explore current reporting practices, to draw upon existing good practice, school leaders were invited to complete an online survey (Appendix 1). This was an initial scoping exercise to establish how schools report student progress. In liaising with school leaders to gather this factual information, the opportunity was used to hear school leaders' views on other aspects of reporting arrangements. Building on this approach, it is planned to provide opportunities for teachers, parents, and students views on reporting to be fed into the process of developing advice on reporting for schools.

The survey was conducted between June 12th and July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Requests to complete the survey were sent directly to school leaders by email via the ACCS, ETBI, JMB, and NAPD. There was a very high response rate, 195 post-primary schools participating in the survey.

### This report

This report outlines the feedback that emerged from analysis of the survey responses. The feedback was collated and categorised into the following areas:

- Current reporting practices
- Views on practical and flexible reporting arrangements
- Conclusions

## 1.2 Current reporting practices

### Frequency and timing of school reports

#### a) First and second year

During first and second year the majority (64%) of schools send out two reports per year. One school indicated that they also send monthly effort grades; a second sends additional mid-term reports to individual students *as appropriate* and another outlined how they also send five additional headmaster reports. Three reports per year are issued by 19%; four by 15% and six by 1.5% of the schools surveyed. The majority (68%) of first reports are sent during Dec (42%)-Jan (26%) by those schools issuing either two or three reports per year. 20% issue their first report in October and 12% in November. June is the most common month for final reports no matter how frequently reports are issued.

#### b) Third Year

A similar pattern is evident in third year with the majority (63%) of schools issuing two reports per year, 21% of schools issue three reports per year and 7.5% four reports per year. A tiny minority issue more frequent reports. One school issues four additional headmaster reports and a second indicated that they also issue one Academic Progress report. The majority of schools issue their first report in December (44%) or January (15%) with 19% issued in October and 18% in November. Again, those issuing their first reports in December or January are those schools that issue either two or three reports per year. In third year the majority of schools issue second reports in February (20%) or March (41%).

Analysis of the open response comments reveals that some schools issue reports outside the *standard times* as needed. These additional reports are frequently *comment only* with a focus on progress. For others they may relate to specific exam results such as 'oral exams' or relate to 'learning support' issues. One school sends out comment only *progress reports* in October to exam years. A second sends additional *Effort and Commitment* reports to second year students. A few schools stated that on request more information or progress reports can be shared with parents.

Some of the open response comments express the need for more feedback and reporting but this must be balanced with the comments highlighting the time involved in reporting

## Information included in School Reports

The most frequently reported information is *subject teachers' comments* (97.3%) followed by *grade/test scores* (93%). *Attendance* (84%), *class tutor/year head comments* (69%) and *punctuality* (56%) are the next most frequently reported information. *Behaviour* (45%) and *effort* (38%) are included by a large minority of schools. Comments on *personal and social development* are only included by 17% of responding schools and only a very small percentage of schools surveyed included other information outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: Additional Information included in school reports**

Results of standardised tests (5%)	Key skills profile (1%)
Goal setting (5%)	A detailed portfolio listing skills and achievements (1 school)
Other certification eg ECDL (5%)	<i>Literacy and Learning</i> comment (1 school)
Student self-evaluation (4%)	<i>Student's learning strengths</i> comment (1 school)
Parent/Student comments (1%)	

In some schools ‘comment only’ reports are issued in addition to twice yearly graded reports. Responses highlight the importance of focusing on explaining how the student can improve. The importance of teachers providing real personalized and focused comments rather than simply using a drop down menu was also highlighted.

Some schools comment on student attitude and application to work, ongoing assessment grades, level of student classroom activity, project work and oral presentations, progress, areas to improve upon and Literacy information.

*In first year, we sent a copy of the STAR Reading scores home with the summer reports as a starting point to link the importance of literacy development skills to all subjects.*

Ratings or marks are sometimes given for application, attainment or engagement.

*Matrix of descriptors under four headings (Achieved with distinction, Achieved with Merit, Achieved, Not Achieved) for three categories (Participation in Class, Homework and Study, Overall Progress) provided as hard copy with the report card, and also available for download on College website*

Unsurprisingly, considering the size of the survey sample, JCSP profiling was reported to be used in a number of instances.

## Involvement of students in reporting

### a) School report

The most commonly reported way for students to be involved is through feedback from their parents after a parent/teacher meeting (73%) with 63% of students getting a copy of their

report. Less than half the schools (47%) surveyed provide an opportunity for students to discuss their report with their subject teacher or year head. Peer discussion of reports is rare with only 5% of respondent schools enabling student involvement through peer discussion of the report.

A number of respondents said that students receive feedback from their teachers on a regular basis.

*A mixture of formal and informal feedback is given to individual students, depending on patterns of results, certain students may be met to have particular issues addressed or acknowledged. Result meetings may take into consideration personal circumstances in order to reinforce and encourage onwards.*

Some comments were made on the impact of timing of feedback on the opportunities to provide discussion, this is easier to accommodate when reports are issued during the year rather than year end. One school reported doing this only with exam classes.

**b) Parent/teacher meeting**

Students in junior cycle attend Parent/Teacher meetings in a minority of the schools (26%) surveyed. A number of schools stated that this opportunity was only currently available to senior students, with one school starting this practice in third year.

One school reported a different type of meeting between parents, tutors and students.

*Our parents meet the student's tutor in October for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>. The report is shared and a plan is devised between all parties. Up to 15 minutes is scheduled for the meeting. This has proven to be effective. It opens up real conversations between the young people and their parents. The same process for 2<sup>nd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and TY in January with the Christmas report. We use a target setting section in this report and have now replace this with a section entitled LEARNING STRENGTHS. We worked on possible comments in subject departments prior to the report writing season and I also supplied a bank of sample comments. I look forward to the feedback from students and parents.*

## Target setting

Involvement through target setting after the report, with either a subject/class teacher or year head, is offered in 37% of the schools surveyed. One school highlighted that students are also given a supplementary report that is not generated by the schools information management system (IMS), to reflect on their performance and goals for the future.

*Some teachers set targets it is not a whole school approach, although I would like it to be.*

*We engage with students at junior cycle level in helping them to establish targets in each subject. They are expected to note the results of house exams in their journal and this information forms the basis of the conversation with the teacher. These conversations occur twice a term. Teachers work with groups of 10-12 students and act as their mentor.*

*The Progress Report is based on consultation between student and teacher at the beginning of each month. The student and teacher agree on a target to be aimed for during the coming month, parents sign the report each month.*

School journals were highlighted as being used to facilitate target setting in one school.

*They have a target page in their school journal where they set their target grade in advance of the test and report and parents sign this page. They then fill in their grade when it is received and set their next target grade in consultation with the subject teacher in the class taking their previous grade into consideration.*

Mentors and coaches are used in some schools to help target setting. Two schools mentioned target setting through a mentoring relationship but only at senior cycle. Another school highlighted the use of coaching.

*Each pupil has a coach with whom they discuss their results and effort.*

The type of, and approaches to, assessment used in the context of target-setting decisions are unclear. However, some comments related to target setting, monitoring and reporting on progress suggest dependence on summative, written test-style assessments to monitor performance and progress.

*We are planning to include CAT (Cognitive Abilities Test) and STEN (Standardised Test in Reading and Maths) results this year to encourage teachers, students and parents to measure success/ set targets for improvement.*

## Other reporting practices currently in use in schools

The responses to the open questions revealed these additional reporting practices:

**Online reporting** is being used in a tiny minority of cases with use of either *informal, online reports accessible to parents on an ongoing basis* or google apps.

**Different reporting mechanisms in Transition Year:** These include student self-evaluation; portfolio presentations, use of customised technology to give feedback on student portfolios, parent/teacher/student conferences, and student interviews to encourage reflection on achievements and challenges. The resource challenges for interviews were also raised. One school noted the use of a *portfolio discussion* between TY students, teachers and parents, as being useful.

**Homework Journals** as a means of reporting were highlighted by a small number of respondents. Class tests and behaviour are included here and sometimes parents are asked to sign them. Sometimes predicted and actual grades and differences between them are included.

**Individual progress reports:** While many schools emphasised that teachers are always willing to meet parents, one school issues *Individual progress reports* at the parent's request.

**Student support group** for monitoring:

*Many junior certificate students are monitored and supported through a student support group within the school which meets on a weekly basis.*

**Other monitoring mechanisms:** Some schools provide weekly pastoral care and regular meetings between guidance counsellors and exam classes to monitor grades and concerns.

**Merit letters and Progress reports:** One school sends individual merit letters, by post to parents. Another school sends *letters and certificates to acknowledge and commend the student's efforts* and issues *letters to parents of students who are not working to their potential*.

**Reporting for students who are experiencing difficulties:**

*We use a Yellow Card to identify daily goals with students in difficulty. A daily report goes home to give parents and the student clear feedback on how he has managed those goals. It is signed by parents and returned to the year head the following morning. Some students (mostly 1st, 2nd & 3rd Years) elect to remain on the Yellow Card for several weeks. Some have it imposed on them.*

**Continuous assessment/progress tests to track progress:** A number of respondents mentioned monthly reporting and continuous assessment being used with first or second years to identify progress/problems enabling required corrective action to be taken earlier. Another mentioned using assessment tests with second and fifth year students, in the hope of

keeping students engaged with learning as they await entry into the examination years.

### 1.3 Views on practical and flexible reporting arrangements

#### What should an effective reporting process do?

As table 2 highlights, the consensus among respondents was that each of these qualities is very important in a reporting process.

**Table 2: Priorities for an effective reporting process in descending order**

Priority	% agreement	Mean score <sup>1</sup>
Show student progress and achievement	97%	4.79
Benefit students	97%	4.79
Be easy to understand and constructive	96%	4.75
Value Professional judgement of teachers	95%	4.67
Be time efficient and manageable to prepare	93%	4.67
Recognise individual achievement	91%	4.57
Include information on the development of key skills	79%	3.99
Involve Students	71%	3.99
Actively involve parents	70%	3.99

There is a general consensus that the process needs to be time efficient and manageable and not overburden teachers and it is felt that the *practical and logistical challenges* should be addressed at school management and DES level prior to inception. The importance of CPD for teachers in providing feedback was highlighted to ensure that feedback is effective and doesn't always resort to common, general descriptions of performance or progress.

Some concerns were raised in relation to parental involvement in terms of time and equity. One concern related to the time requirements and the belief was expressed that the current *parent-teacher meeting model* was sufficient and works well to facilitate parental involvement.

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<sup>1</sup> 1=least important. 5= most important

A second concern relates to parents who might not want to get involved or not feel confident enough to get involved *actively* in the process. The question was posed as to how to *sensitively deal with this so as not to hurt them or their children.*

## Essential features of flexible and practical reporting arrangements

The focus of question 9 was on what should be included in a National Template for reporting student progress. Respondents were asked to rate a number of features and there was an option to provide additional information in an open comment box. The following key points were made by respondents.

**Grade and comments:** The importance of reports including both grades and formative comments is evident (92%). There was very little support for reports that would only include grades (17%) or formative comments (12%). Two comments related to a culture of expectation of grading in reports.

*We tried comment only marking and found it was not fully appreciated by parents and students.*

Nonetheless, both felt that with time a comment/formative only approach may be accepted.

**Student involvement:** Over half of respondents (51%) believe it is important to facilitate student comments on their progress but a number of respondents commented that while it is *laudable* it would be challenging to implement.

**Flexibility:** There was a very high level of agreement (87%) that any template would need to have flexibility and customization to suit local circumstances but one respondent commented that it should be the same template for all schools otherwise it is simply a suggested template.

**Recognising students' wider achievements:** A high level of agreement exists (88%) on the importance of recognising students wider achievements within the report.

*It should provide insight into their strengths and the wide range of skills developed.*

*Include student contribution to the overall life of the school e.g. extra-curricular activity.*

**Comparison to National Standards:** Less than half of respondents (45%) felt that it was important that there be comparison of students' performance with the national. An analysis of the commentary related to this area suggests that the respondents have a particular understanding of the concept of National Standards. Many respondents viewed conforming to national standards as inevitably involving comparison of a school's results/performance with those of other schools. The *Framework for Junior Cycle* presents national standards largely from a quality assurance rather than a quality control perspective. However, these are some of the concerns emerging from the survey:

- The impact of socio-economic factors on the work of schools and students
- A cold 'national average' display of results without contextualisation would miss this
- It was felt this could lead to discouragement and demotivation for students and teachers
- Demotivation effects would be greater for DEIS schools and the suggestion was made to compare DEIS schools with other DEIS schools rather than against general national standards
- Impact of school size and fluctuating student abilities: one respondent highlighted that results in their school fluctuate dramatically year on year reflecting student ability and the fact that they accept students of all abilities and that this would disadvantage them in any comparisons with schools that *cherry pick* students
- Greater detail and definition of what comparison involves is needed. In welcoming the idea of comparisons one responder highlighted the importance of issues of uniformity of content and delivery and rigorous and common testing and assessment methods that would be needed to diminish variance

Question 12 specifically sought the views of respondents on what they considered to be the essential features of flexible and practical reporting arrangements. 53% of respondents answered this open question.

The most frequently reported themes emerging from the analysis of the commentary are ease of use (30%), online accessibility (21%), and efficiency of reporting (17%). There is a general consensus that a reporting process should be beneficial to students and help direct learning and improvement and highlight areas of improvement. This consensus is support by respondents giving the highest ranking to *Show student progress and achievement* and *Benefit student* in question 11 (Table 2).

However, some tensions emerged when in the comments relating to rigidity/flexibility of templates, mode of input of teacher comments, and student involvement.

**Rigidity vs flexibility:** The analysis of question 9 revealed a very high level of agreement (87%) that any template would need to have flexibility and customisation built-in to suit local circumstances. In response to question 12, a number of respondents spoke of the need for a reporting template but a tension emerged between those who felt that it should be flexible and those who felt a standardised approach was needed.

Arguments for flexibility include:

*[The need to accommodate] ...a wide range of approaches and allowing for the individual needs of students and school to be met*

*The report needs to be flexible as a school may wish to focus on different aspects of the student's development at different stages and different times of the year*

Arguments for a less flexible standardised template include:

*Very concerned that if the reports were too flexible and contextual to the school that it would lead to more work and be thrown at the principal and deputy principal, would prefer a standard national report.*

*Might flexible reporting exaggerate the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged? An essential feature of flexible reporting is that it should work towards reducing the impact of social disadvantage*

**Free comments vs a drop-down menu of comments:** A tension is evident between those who would prefer a fast, easy-to-use reporting method using 1-5 grading and drop-down comments versus those suggesting a fuller, richer more personalised feedback from teacher to student which is more likely to support learning and motivate students but which is viewed as time consuming.

**Student involvement:** Table 2 above illustrates how respondents value the need for reporting to benefit students and to involve students. The analysis of the open responses to question 12 gives offers some insight into why they may be prioritised as opposite ends of the table. The benefits and challenges of student involvement are reflected in the two comments below:

*Student input into reporting would be an immense step forward, allowing students to take ownership and responsibility for their learning and target setting for the future*

*Having worked on the Record of Achievement process in the UK, I would like to say that student comment although appears to be a good idea became very problematic. The comment was to be negotiated with the teacher for every subject and this caused problems from the outset. Secondly the time to discuss the comment ate into teaching time and writing/typing the comment also took a great deal of time. In fact reports could take up to 3 weeks to produce. Eventually it became clear that students wrote what they thought teachers wanted to hear and this defeated the whole process!*

**Parental involvement-**The importance of parents getting access to reports online or where needed in a paper format was highlighted a number of times. But the contrasting difficulty of facilitating parental involvement where there may be complex family or guardianship situations or the involvement of Tusla was also highlighted.

*To do this right may involve giving each school a dedicated post outside the basket of Assistant Principal/Special duties posts similar to programme coordinator.*

## 1.4 Conclusion

This scoping exercise with school leaders proved a very informative starting point for the development of practical and flexible reporting arrangements. The level of engagement of respondents must be acknowledged. Furthermore, half of respondents indicated that they are open to being contacted again and provided their contact details. NCCA are very grateful for the assistance of the ACCS, ETBI, JMB, and NAPD in distributing and promoting the survey, for the feedback received from respondents, and for the commitment shown by so many schools to provide more information.

The findings of this survey indicate that there are many innovative examples of reporting arrangements already in place in schools. Working with schools will be an important next step in developing reporting processes and practices further. It is important to note, however, that the majority of schools who responded share similar reporting arrangements. Schools generally send out two written reports to parents each year, teachers discuss student progress at one parent-teacher meeting per year, and students do not normally participate in these meetings. The gap between current practice and the kind of reporting schools might like to see in place is became very evident when schools were asked about the features of reporting they would value and wish to see in place. The challenge of building on good reporting practices in schools towards the kinds of approaches favoured is a significant one but, on the evidence of the survey there is strong support for enhancing reporting arrangements. The key challenges identified centred around:

- Involving parents and students more extensively in the reporting process
- Developing an understanding of working to and towards national standards
- Aligning changes in reporting practices to changes in assessment practices
- Developing time-efficient and manageable reporting arrangements that not only provide information to parents but also motivate students.

The review suggests that provision of adequate and sufficient CPD and resources are fundamental to changing reporting practices. Further investigation will be required into the precise nature and scale of the resources and CPD that will be needed.



# Appendix 1: Online survey used during the review of post-primary reporting practices

Survey questions										
<b>1. School type.</b>										
	All boys	All girls	Mixed							
Voluntary secondary school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Community and Comprehensive school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Vocational school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							
<b>2. Which of the following school administration systems do you use to generate reports on student progress for parents/guardians?</b>										
<input type="radio"/> VShare <input type="radio"/> Dataset (SIMS) <input type="radio"/> Advance Learning (Facility) Other (please specify) <input type="text"/>										
<b>3. How many school reports do you issue to parents/guardians of your 1st/2nd year students?</b>										
<input type="radio"/> One <input type="radio"/> Two		<input type="radio"/> Three <input type="radio"/> Four								
Other (please specify) <input type="text"/>										
<b>4. Please indicate when each report is issued.</b>										
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July
First report	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Second report	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Third report	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fourth report	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>									
<b>5. How many schools reports do you issue to parents/guardians of your 3rd year students?</b>										
<input type="radio"/> One <input type="radio"/> Two		<input type="radio"/> Three <input type="radio"/> Four								
Other (please specify) <input type="text"/>										

**6. Please indicate when each report is issued to your third year students.**

	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July
First report	<input type="checkbox"/>									
Second report	<input type="checkbox"/>									
Third report	<input type="checkbox"/>									
Fourth report	<input type="checkbox"/>									

Other (please specify)

**7. What information do you include in your school reports?**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attendance                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Other certification (e.g. ECDL)                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Punctuality                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Results of standardised tests (e.g. CAT test scores) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Test score/Grade                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Parent/Student comment                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Subject teacher comment                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Goal setting   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Class Tutor/Year Head Comment              | <input type="checkbox"/> Student self-evaluation                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Comment on personal and social development | <input type="checkbox"/> Effort   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Key skills profile                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Behavior   |

Other (please specify)

**8. How are students involved in reporting in your school?**

- They receive a copy of the report
- They discuss the contents of the report with their subject teacher/class teacher/year head
- They discuss the contents of the report with their peers
- They attend parent/teacher meetings and discuss the report there
- They receive feedback from their parents after a parent/teacher meeting
- They set targets with their subject teacher/class teacher/year head on foot of the report

Please tell us more

**9. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements where 5 is most important and 1 is least important.**

**A National Template for reporting student progress should...**

	1	2	3	4	5
Include grades/marks only	<input type="radio"/>				
facilitate student comment on their progress	<input type="radio"/>				
Include grades/marks together with formative comments on reports	<input type="radio"/>				
only provide formative comments	<input type="radio"/>				
have the flexibility to be customised to suit local circumstances	<input type="radio"/>				
allow for comparison of student performance against national standards	<input type="radio"/>				
Include the recognition of student's wider achievement within the report	<input type="radio"/>				
Please tell us more	<input type="text"/>				

**10. Please share any additional reporting practices that your school has developed.**

**11. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements where 5 is most important and 1 is least important.**

**An effective reporting process should...**

	1	2	3	4	5
involve students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
value professional judgment of teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
show student progress and achievement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Include information on the development of Key Skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
recognize individual achievement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
benefit students	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
be time efficient and manageable to prepare	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
easy to understand and constructive	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
actively involve parents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Please tell us more	<input type="text"/>				

**12. In your opinion, what are the essential features of flexible and practical reporting arrangements?**

**13. The NCCA may wish to contact you based on the responses you share with us through this survey.**

- Yes, I am willing to discuss the responses.  
 No, I would not like to be contacted further.

**14. If you have selected 'Yes' to the above question, please share your contact details.**

Name:	<input type="text"/>
School Name:	<input type="text"/>
Email Address:	<input type="text"/>
Phone Number:	<input type="text"/>

**Thank you for taking the time to complete our survey and please do not forget to submit by pressing the Done button.**

