

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
35 Fitzwilliam Square
Dublin 2
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November 1st, 2019

RE: Senior Cycle Review

To Whom It May Concern,

Please see below Fianna Fáil's submission to the ongoing consultation on the Senior Cycle Review.

It is important to note that the existing Senior Cycle has served us well. It has ensured that most pupils reach their potential, it has contributed to Ireland's reputation for a highly skilled workforce and it has ensured that the clear majority of those living in Ireland have the necessary skills to succeed. That said, we fully accept that the review which is underway is necessary. A number of gaps exist within the current framework, and careful consideration is required of the necessary changes to modernise the system further.

Fianna Fáil believe that best international practice in both curricula and subjects should be the goal of this review and any subsequent reform.

Education is a good in itself and educators should be leading that reform. They should be to the forefront of this reform rather than other bodies. We need to trust teachers and academics.

As the NCCA will be aware, the challenges which emerged following the review and reform of the Junior Cycle have taken several years to address. Some reforms remain ongoing. In this context, it is important that the workability of reforms within the classroom are given due consideration. It is vital that all stakeholders are fully involved at all stages of the review.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas Byrne TD

Improved Vocational Education

Ireland is lagging far behind Britain and many EU countries in the scale and diversity of apprenticeships currently offered here. There is a long-standing emphasis placed on the critical importance of apprenticeships and vocational education and training in Europe, and worldwide. But the current administration has been extremely late in facing the need to develop and advance the apprenticeship sector.

Traditionally, the focus has been on craft apprenticeships in Ireland, but until recently little has been done to expand the range of career-enhancing apprenticeships that can be provided.

Approximately 2 per cent of school-leavers are participating in apprenticeships in Ireland, compared to some 50 per cent of young people in Germany. Ireland's national apprenticeship system is chronically underdeveloped and requires the current Government to be aggressively proactive in getting additional apprenticeship occupations established, that are of a high-quality and are built to last.

To meet the challenges of the future, Ireland must have a much broader, fully-functioning, apprenticeship model.

It is unfortunately the case that the senior cycle is viewed as geared more towards higher education entry than other potential pathways, such as apprenticeships. Fianna Fáil believes that the upcoming curriculum must address this ongoing issue.

The review should consider the feasibility of introducing pre-apprenticeship training in sixth year in secondary school for students seeking a non-academic pathway to employment.

These students would then be better prepared for an apprenticeship when they leave school. The NCCA could also examine a limited form of apprenticeship training or short courses during transition year, a time when many students have more space to reflect on their post-school goals.

The ETBs are already involved in work-study apprenticeship schemes for school-leavers and could leverage their expertise in this domain among second-level students. ETBs or Institutes of technology (IoTs) could operate mini 'taster' apprenticeship courses lasting four weeks duration in their centres over July for students who have just finished their Leaving Cert.

Maintain the Position of the Irish Language

Fianna Fáil have committed to Irish as a compulsory subject up to Leaving Certificate.

At the same time, we believe that Ireland needs a robust policy on international languages – one that is dedicated, realistic and achievable. Unfortunately, this Government has failed to provide any comprehensive vision that would transform modern language education in this country.

Fundamental to improving both fluency and vibrancy of the Irish language is to maintain it as a living language. Fianna Fáil believes that we must increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language. It is also our objective that as many citizens as possible are bilingual in both Irish and English.

As a party, we are firmly committed to the implementation of the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language.

Achievable Reform

Fianna Fáil believe that reforms must be achievable within the classroom. We note the recent comments of the OECD with regard to the reforms which could stem from this review. Fianna Fáil believe that consideration is required of the timelines and resources required for reforms to take place. It is already well known that many teachers are dealing with initiative overload. This issue must be improved rather than worsened by any reforms.

Improved Focus on Wellbeing

Fianna Fáil believe that there must be an increased focus on ensuring students' physical and mental wellbeing during upper secondary education. This is a feature of many other jurisdictions which should be rolled out more fully in Ireland.

Preparing for Later Life

Fianna Fáil believe that it is vital that young people leave school equipped with the practical tools they will need for the rest of their lives. Key information about issues such as rent, home ownership and mortgages, key workplace competencies, financial literacy and IT safety should all be part of that preparation.

Life skills should form a core component of the senior cycle curriculum as preparation for the future. This could enhance the development of personal and interpersonal skills and in turn enhance young people's wellbeing and ability to cope with challenges.

Support Enhanced Career Guidance

Fianna Fáil believe we should enhance career guidance to support students in making decisions about what pathways and combinations might best suit their needs. As previously mentioned, the place of apprenticeships should be considered further, as well as supporting improved links between third level and teachers involved in career guidance.

Improving the Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages

There is a need to reform the teaching and learning of foreign languages in our schools in Ireland, particularly in the context of Brexit. For a marginal saving, the previous government decided to abolish the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Programme, which had been established in more than 800 primary schools by the time Fianna Fáil left office. This was a senseless and hugely regressive step for children's education advancement.

At present, it is anomalous that Ireland is the only country in Europe (apart from Scotland) where foreign language is not compulsory.

Despite the fact that we have the highest proportion of citizens in the EU (66%) who say they do not know a second language. Our ability to compete internationally, to attract FDI investment and in particular to take full advantage of the employment opportunities that the presence of multinationals has bestowed, is being damaged by the lack of a coherent strategy on the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

Fianna Fáil proposes a number of measures to encourage and develop foreign language education.

Firstly, the Strategy should re-establish the Modern Languages in Primary School Programme and ensure its introduction to all primary schools nationwide. We recommend expanding this programme on a national basis.

Secondly, the Strategy should make the learning of a foreign language up to Leaving Certificate level compulsory. At present, it is anomalous that Ireland is the only country in Europe (apart from Scotland) where foreign language is not compulsory.

Finally, it is also critical that modern languages be treated as a priority subject at second and third level, especially development of certain L3 languages (specifically German, French, Spanish, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, Russian and Arabic).

Improving Physical Education

PE needs to be recognised as one of the most important subjects a child undertakes, and intervention is needed now before it is too late. The physical activity routines developed by students have the capacity to shape their attitudes towards exercise long into their adult lives, long after they have completed their education.

PE in Ireland needs to be redefined and be given a renewed focus as a subject that goes beyond just the performance of activity routines in primary school. The benefits of PE have become increasingly unclear for many students as they progress from primary school through to secondary, especially among female pupils.

The Irish Heart Foundation estimates that 85,000 children living on the island today who will die prematurely due to obesity and issues associated with being overweight. Ireland is on course to be the heaviest nation in Europe by 2030, One in 4 children are now overweight or obese.

Schools have an important part to play in addressing this issue. This includes ensuring that schools provide sufficient time and facilities to encourage physical activity, informing young people of nutrition and the removal of the advertisement of fast food from schools.

It is recommended that children from the ages of five to seventeen should partake in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity daily. A Growing Up in Ireland study has indicated that only a quarter of children meet this target

Although guidelines state that two hours of PE a week should be provided in post primary schools, just 4% achieve this at 1st year, 3% in 2nd year, 1% in third year and none in 5th and 6th year.

Fianna Fáil supports efforts to make PE a curricular subject in sixth year whereby students would be eligible for full subject examination for taking a mixture of a practical/project continuous assessment and a summative exam. This idea was originally championed by Micheál Martin when he was previously Minister for Education.