

Sinn Féin Submission to NCCA on Senior Cycle Review

Sinn Féin believes that education is a basic and fundamental human right and should be available to everyone on the basis of full equality.

We require an education system that is diverse, adaptable, and that seeks to see the best for every student that partakes in it; regardless of perceived academic ability.

Post Primary Education, including the Senior Cycle is about much more than CAO points obtained, or a pathway to University. It is about much more than grades, successes and failures. It is about preparing students for life beyond their teens where they can fully partake in a society that values and appreciates their individual skills, and is about a holistic education, which allows everyone to flourish and reach their full potential according to their individual strength.

While we do believe that there are flaws within the education system as a whole, very many of these, in our view, comes down to funding and resourcing at a governmental level.

The existing curriculum for Senior Cycle students has strengths, however, in some other respects it is outdated in the sense of reflecting the needs of students and society more generally.

We welcome this being opened to a public consultation and hope that our submission can play a valuable part in shaping the discourse in how this process might progress.

I hope that similar to other processes organised by the NCCA there will be further scope for discussion and engagement.

Is Mise le meas,



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Úrlabhraí Shinn Féin ar Oideachas agus Scileanna

Contents:

- Transitioning beyond post-primary level education
- Life Skills
- Types of assessment and learning
- Core subjects
- Digital Literacy

Main Body

Transitioning beyond post-primary level education

We fundamentally believe that every government should strive to give the young people today, and the generations that come after them, an education system that is fit for purpose; and that allows them to pursue their dreams and goals without inhibitions.

When it is said that the education system and curriculum therein is fit for purpose it means a system which prepares its students for whatever path they may choose, and that it is tailored within reason to suit the desires of the students it supports.

Sinn Féin are of the belief that, although somewhat understandable given the current marking and points structure, that in some schools, the entire focus of the leaving cert and senior cycle is about obtaining a place in an Institute of Technology or University.

It must be acknowledged that while many of these types of courses are attractive to a great number of students each year, that they are also not the reality for many, nor does it make sense for all students to pursue these areas.

There are countless schools across the state that are underrepresented when it comes to third level, and where unfortunately, many young people miss out on opportunities due to obstacles relating to income, culture and support.

However, it is also the case, that there are many schools across the state, that have all or nearly all those who have completed the leaving cert going to university. This is not sustainable or sensible either. Many young people end

up feeling under pressure, due to social or cultural reasons, taking up courses that do not suit their skills capabilities and talents.

Apprenticeships offer a tried and tested method of developing highly skilled workers using a mixture of course work and practical on the job learning. Across the state we lack significant alternative opportunities for young people to pursue other education and training, such as limited numbers of apprenticeships.

There is little opportunity for current employees to pursue an ambition of formally qualifying in their trade. While it is not within the gift or schools to address the lack of apprenticeships on offer, we feel that an interagency/departmental approach to the expansion, diversification and promotion of apprenticeships is required.

Where this is relevant to the review of the Senior Cycle is firstly that students who express an interest in pursuing these routes are, at least anecdotally, not given the supports and guidance in how they should go about doing so; a stark comparison to those who envisage themselves progressing into more formal types of third-level education.

Sinn Féin believes that more can be done in this regard, in a way that addresses the needs and desires of these students, similar to the way in which Further Education has been given more time and effort in recent years.

Life Skills

While there has been an acknowledgement that schools are not the panacea for teaching young people basic life skills, there are some very small changes that can go a long way in helping young people move beyond what is a system of dependency for many, into a more independent lifestyle when they leave post-primary education.

The Senior Cycle Review Consultation document does reference this although in less detail than we might expect given that financial management, while although important, is not the only life skill which can be taught via schools.

There have been moves of late to reform the curriculum underpinning sexual education in schools, as well as moves to introduce a more structured curriculum on mental health and well-being that is inclusive of coping skills and a brief understanding of types of mental illness, both of which we believe

would be quite useful for students in terms of understanding both their bodies and their minds in looking after their own health. We would hope both of these topics can be thoroughly assessed and worked into any reforms.

Finally, we believe that there may be scope, maybe in the form of short courses, to provide students with some skills and knowledge in relation to nutrition and the types of food they should be cooking and eating, as well as wellbeing more generally.

The reality is that the state is facing into an obesity crisis with childhood obesity already seeing a sharp rise. Any such short courses would go a long way in addressing an issue that we are undoubtedly going to have to deal with in the not too distant future.

While many schools offer a good quality physical education, many others do not. Very often this is down to facilities. I understand that under Project Ireland 2040, there is an objective to ensure as many post primary schools as possible can have a sports hall and facilities. I would encourage the NCCA if it were to take a position on ensuring all children have good quality physical education as part of the leaving cycle, could give a further impetus to this.

Types of Assessment and Learning

It has been widely acknowledged amongst academics studying how students learn, absorb and retain information differs and can be categorised into a handful of ways. While it is not realistic that teachers can not teach the same class or subjects in numerous different ways to a group of students, we think it is fair to state that the current methods of teaching are specifically aimed at rote learners i.e. students that can simply memorise what is being taught.

There is a need for curricula to be more reflective of how different types of students learn, and for a more holistic approach to be taken in how subjects are taught in a way that is inclusive of as many types of learner as possible. While this may be initially cumbersome and time-consuming Sinn Féin believe that it will be beneficial to the future of our education system in the long-term and more in line with European norms.

Notwithstanding this, one of the great merits of the Leaving Cert as it stands is the fact that for those who are marking the papers, all papers are equal. No matter what student, from whatever school or background, the marker must

treat every paper equally. No advantage of culture, acculturation, or socialisation can influence it.

While the leaving certificate is flawed and does not suit all types of intelligence or skill, we must ensure that whatever may follow, however that might include ongoing assessment, or any form of project work, can ensure that there is no advantage, however implicit or unintentional, granted to more socially advantaged young people.

Core Subjects

There had been much discussion regarding core subjects in recent months, following on from the decision made by the Minister regarding History in the Junior Cycle.

There has also been much discussion around the subject of Irish, and whether or not it is to be retained as a core subject going forward at Senior Cycle, something which I note the review acknowledges there are mixed views on.

The Irish language and its potential for revival is highly dependent on its place in the education system. While many are critical of the manner in which Irish is taught at times in our schools, not always without foundation, the contrast between the number of people with Irish, as well as those with some competency in Irish, in the south as distinct from the North, is closely related to the fact that after partition, the teaching of Irish in schools, and Irish medium education, helped to slow, and eventually reverse the decline in Irish speaking. This has not been an unqualified success by any means.

Undoubtedly, there could be much greater proficiency in Irish among students. There are many ways in which this might be improved. In particular, I believe higher standards must be demanded of the teacher training colleges, as there appears to be some incidence of teachers in our schools, at primary and post primary levels, whose Irish is not at an adequate standard to teach it properly and confidently, and their lack of enthusiasm for the subject inevitably transfers to the students.

We believe that Irish as a core subject should be retained to ensure that every student can have a positive, meaningful and fulfilling Irish language learning experience from preschool to right through to third-level.

I note that the public agrees, according to a Kantar Millward Brown Poll that 64 per cent agreed that “Irish should remain as a core subject, i.e. that all students study, up to the Leaving Certificate,”

In that vein, we believe there is a need to develop a comprehensive Policy for Irish in the Education System from Pre-School to Third Level.

It cannot be assumed that Irish will be available to all school students if it were optional in the schools. The provision of any subject depends on different conditions: demand from students, supply of teachers, and classrooms available. It is also worth noting that each cycle is interdependent – if Irish is optional for the Leaving Certificate there will be less emphasis on Irish in the Junior Certificate, or even in primary school.

Phasing of changes to Senior Cycle.

As an aside, I believe that it may pay to give the changes to the Senior Cycle some more time.

The first full cohort to complete the new Junior Cycle has yet to complete the Junior Cert – therefore, we do not fully know the impact these changes have had, and whether or not it has been a success.

Perhaps it may make sense to allow the first cohort, or more than that, to complete the cycle, so that we can take stock of this, and see how this can be applied to any Leaving Cert proposals and changes, particularly if this relates to fewer subjects being examined.

Digital Literacy

There needs to be much greater focus given to the education of children and parents on online safety and digital well-being. Education and awareness-raising around the risks – and the opportunities and rights – of children engaging online should begin in primary school.

We believe that it is essential that all children benefit from a good Digital Literacy education at both primary and secondary level in schools. Digital literacy will need to become the fourth pillar of our education system, alongside reading, writing and arithmetic. This will require investment in curriculum development, teacher training and supporting resources.

We also believe that every school needs a digital champion (a teacher or principal) who can lead on policy development, support and delivery of digital literacy and digital wellbeing education to children, parents and teachers.

Sinn Féin have moved a Bill to introduce an office of Digital Safety Commissioner, and while it would not be a silver bullet that addresses all of our concerns about children being safe online, it would go a long way towards making the spaces in which they operate a more transparent and positive environment. It would complement and advise in any such digital literacy programme which is rolled out in schools.