

## Study Visit to the Republic of Ireland

### 15<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> May 2001

#### **Programme**

1. The itinerary included five school visits - St Conleth's Vocational College, Newbridge College, Holy Family Girls' School, Patrician College (all Newbridge) and Maynooth Post-Primary School, and meetings with representatives of the Department of Education and Science, the Schools Inspectorate, the National Association of Post-Primary Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), the Irish Business and Employers Federation (IBEC) and the National Council for the Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

#### **Background**

2. In 1998/99 there was a total of three hundred and sixty-two thousand pupils enrolled in post-primary education, attending a total of seven hundred and fifty-nine schools: four hundred and thirty-two of these are secondary schools with enrolments totalling two hundred and eleven thousand (58%), two hundred and forty-five are vocational schools (or community colleges) with enrolments of ninety-eight thousand (27%) and eighty-two are comprehensive/community schools, with about 15% of the school population. According to the School Accommodation Commission, the average enrolment of post-primary schools is four hundred and sixty pupils, which reflects the rural nature of school provision.

3. The secondary schools, which include some fee-paying schools, are privately owned and managed, the great majority by religious orders, and the remainder by Boards of Management or individuals. Over 95% of the cost of teachers' salaries are met by the State. In addition, allowances and capitation

grants are paid to the 95% of schools which participate in the free education scheme.

4. Vocational and community colleges are administered by local vocational education committees, which are statutory bodies, and include local authority representatives in their membership. They are funded up to 93% of their total costs, with the balance provided by receipts generated by the VECs. The community and comprehensive schools are allocated individual budgets by the State.

5. Second level education consists of a three-year Junior Cycle followed by a two or three-year Senior Cycle. The Junior Certificate examination is taken after three years. In the Senior Cycle there is an optional one-year Transition Year programme followed by a choice of three Leaving Certificate programmes - Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational and the Leaving Certificate Applied.

## Findings

6. While the official policy since the 1960s has been in favour of comprehensive curricular provision, there are relatively few comprehensive schools as such and in practice school developments have been managed according to local needs and preferences. This is evidenced by the fact that some towns have the traditional pattern of three or four separate schools - a Catholic boys' secondary, a Catholic girls' secondary, a vocational school, and in some cases a co-educational fee-paying school or a Protestant secondary school. Other towns might be served by one large community school. These can be developed ab initio or from the merging of two or more secondary and vocational schools. While relatively small, this school type is growing slowly - three new schools have been established over the last two years.

7. Almost any combination of school types is possible and it would be misleading to suggest that the system is uniformly comprehensive. While schools are forbidden from using entrance examinations to select pupils on the basis of their academic or intellectual ability, this is not a statutory requirement, and there is evidence that some primary schools and post-primary schools use

tests (in the last year of primary or the first year of post-primary) to assess pupils for the purpose of banding into differentiated ability groupings. The Inspectorate indicated that coaching for these tests is happening in primary schools.

### **School Admissions and Enrolments**

8. Transfer and admissions arrangements to post-primary schools appear to be very informal and unregulated. Each of the schools visited indicated that all pupils who applied are normally admitted and there was little evidence of the need for or application of a formal enrolment policy/criteria. There is over capacity in the post-primary system generally as a result of the declining school population and schools are in competition for pupils. Parents make separate applications to each school of preference, and are able to make multiple applications. As there is no regional or central management of the admissions system it is possible that some schools will not be certain about their actual enrolments until the pupils arrive at the start of each school year. To preclude this some schools arrange for registration by parents in person at a common date and time.

9. In the more popular schools enrolments would be limited by the physical capacity, ie, teaching spaces available in the school. Even then, at the schools we visited the impression gained was that additional pupils would be accommodated (somehow) if the demand arose.

10. Schools in rural areas normally have local catchment areas - for the purpose of transport eligibility - which would be agreed in conjunction with the Department of Education, and this would be the main determinant of enrolments. There are no catchment areas in Dublin and other main towns, eg, Cork and Limerick. In these areas, particularly parts of Dublin, there is over-provision and parents are able to choose from a wide range of schools, including fee-paying schools (about 5% of provision), which are very popular and tend to draw pupils away from the secondary schools and community colleges. Admissions policies for the more popular schools include priority for siblings, feeder primary schools, parental connections, etc. The combination of these factors has produced a system which, at face value, appears to be highly socially selective.

### Internal Assessment

11. Standardised teacher assessment of pupils' performance, progress and attainments is not a part of the national assessment processes, whether at primary or post-primary level. The School Record Card which was introduced in the late 1960s is not maintained in a useful form and serves little purpose in recording the attainments and interests of pupils. As a result there are no systematic arrangements for the transfer of pupil information between primary and post-primary schools and many post-primary schools have developed their own arrangements for testing/assessing pupils' abilities in the first year of Junior Cycle - for the purposes of banding and setting.

12. The syllabuses at both primary and post-primary level are not driven by outcomes, rather they are based on what and how learning takes place and for this reason it was suggested that the curriculum is not susceptible to standardised testing, and that testing as such might be used to determine and restrict pupils' curricular choices at a premature stage.

13. Resistance to the development and use of internal assessment for examination purposes has been led by the teacher unions. They have refused to co-operate with their use for the purpose of State examinations, and with the exception of Irish and modern languages at Leaving Certificate, it has not been possible to include oral testing in such examinations.

14. There is a growing acknowledgement within the Department of Education and Science and other educational bodies that assessment is an essential element of the process of educating and developing children and to enable the objectives of the curriculum to be delivered effectively.

### Curriculum

15. The intention of the Junior Certificate curriculum was to integrate academic and vocational courses and provide a coherent, unified curriculum for all twelve to fifteen year olds in the final stage of compulsory education. However, the scope and content of the Junior Cycle curriculum varies significantly according to the type of school and from one school to another. Schools exercise discretion about the scope of the common core, which can

cover up to ten subjects, including religion, Irish, English, mathematics, physical education, civil, social, and political education. In addition to the core subjects, pupils would be expected to take a number of optional subjects: a report of the NCCA in 1997/98 about the development of the Junior Cycle showed that 25% of schools provided twelve subjects or less whereas fifteen subjects or more were taken in some 35% of schools.

16. All subjects in the Junior Certificate programme are offered at Ordinary and Higher levels and, in the case of English, Irish and mathematics, a Foundation level course is also available. Some schools employ "entrance exams" to assess pupils' abilities for placement in ability bands in the first year of the Junior Cycle. There is coaching at some primary schools to prepare pupils for these "entrance exams" in order to secure a place in the higher ability bands.

17. The NCCA Progress Report found that there was general satisfaction amongst schools and educational bodies about the suitability of the Junior Cycle curriculum for the majority of students. The view was also reached that the curriculum does not properly serve the needs of educationally disadvantaged pupils, others with learning problems, and those with an aptitude for sport. The Review also suggested that there is a lack of coherence between the curriculum objectives, teaching methods and the reliance on external assessment. The Junior Certificate examination is taken at the end of the Junior Cycle. Pupils are not required to achieve any particular standards/levels of attainment to continue into the Senior Cycle.

18. There is an ongoing debate about the need for a more uniform core curriculum for all schools. The NCCA will be pursuing a wide-ranging review of the curriculum and related assessment systems as part of its statutory responsibilities under the Education Act 1998.

19. The Transition Year (TY) programme is available to all pupils in secondary schools. It was introduced in 1993 as part of a revised Senior Cycle programme. Its objective is "to promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of pupils and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society". Pupils can opt

into the programme, leave school, or choose to complete the Senior Cycle in two years.

20. Essentially the Transition Year offers pupils a broad educational experience with a view to the attainment of increased maturity, before proceeding to the next stages of formal study, vocational preparation or employment. The programme is intended to be based on an interdisciplinary approach to learning, using alternative learning environments. The Transition Year is not part of the Leaving Certificate programme, rather it is designed to develop and equip pupils to enter the world of work or to be better able to manage the next stages of formal study. However, there is a view that the TY programme would be more effective if it was integrated within the Senior Cycle.

21. When the TY programme was reviewed by the Inspectorate in 1994/95 some twenty thousand pupils (6%) were participating in over four hundred and fifty schools, ie, the majority of secondary and community schools. The Review established that teachers and pupils found the programme worthwhile, but that there was a need for improvements in its planning and delivery, including greater involvement of parents and employers, and through local/regional networking between schools offering the programme.

22. The scope and content of the curriculum in the Senior Cycle varies according to which of the three available Leaving Certificate programmes are followed. The Leaving Certificate examination is the final examination of post-primary education. In the established Leaving Certificate programme, pupils must take at least five subjects, including Irish. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is the same programme, except that there is a concentration on technical subjects and some extra elements. Because of its high vocational content, it attracted funding from the European Social Fund when it was introduced in 1988. Pupils taking the LCVP must take a minimum of five Leaving Certificate subjects, including Irish, two from a set of vocational subjects and a modern European language, and three Link Modules - Enterprise Education, Preparation for Work and Work Experience.

23. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a self-contained two-year programme for those students who opt not to pursue the other L.C. programmes. It is person-centred involving a cross-curricular approach rather

than subject based. Its objective is to prepare young people for adult and working life. It consists of a number of modules grouped under the headings of general education, vocational education and vocational preparation. Certification in the LCA is not a qualification for direct entry to third-level courses, but students who complete the programme are able to follow many Post-Leaving Certificate courses.

23. The LCA is under "review" by the Inspectorate with a view to making it more attractive to students, and perhaps more amenable to assessment. It is difficult to quantify its value/contribution to securing work because of the high employment situation in the ROI, but there is a widely-held view that it helps to raise the self-esteem of pupils with lower ability and provides them with basic life skills.

24. Perhaps because of the relative success and uptake of the LCVP (and its use of Link Modules rather than vocational courses), together with the high employment levels in a strong economy, there appears to be less concern in the ROI about the status of vocational courses. That said, in 1999 out of over sixty four thousand students who took the Leaving Certificate examination - fifty two thousand followed the established LC, ten thousand sat the LCVP and over two thousand took the LCA.

### **Outputs/Qualifications**

25. There is no public information on performance level and outputs of individual schools. This is Government policy and there appears to be little interest or concern amongst parents, employers or education bodies about the absence of such data. Indeed there was evidence in some of the schools visited that this would be regarded as unhelpful.

26. The staying on rate after the Junior Certificate stage has improved significantly in recent years, with about 82% completing the Senior Cycle. However, there is concern also about high drop out rates from the Transition Year and the Learning Certificate Applied programmes - up to 30%. This is attributed to the ready availability of low-skills employment in the retail and construction industry sectors.

## General

27. The schools system in the Republic has some features similar to the system in NI. There is competition for pupils between the different types of schools, particularly in areas of population decline; schools may not enrol pupils in excess of their approved accommodation base. Parents are influenced by perceived social status and tradition of schools in making choices (although in some rural areas there would be limited choice of school types). Coaching in primary schools for “entrance exams” is distorting the curriculum in P6 and P7. School transport is provided for designated catchment areas (in rural areas), ie, nearest school type. School uniform is worn at most post-primary schools.

## Meetings

### Department of Education & Science

28. The Inspectorate and senior officials provided the Review Body with some helpful insights about the development of the Irish post-primary education system.

29. There have been considerable changes in enrolment trends since the 1970s when there was an expansion of provision in urban areas and the subsequent decline in the school population has resulted in surplus provision in many towns. There is unhelpful competition between schools for pupils. Primary school principals often play a significant role in advising parents about the choice of post-primary school. This approach has given rise to confusion and inappropriate developments in some areas. There is an acceptance that DES will need to adopt a more proactive strategy in developing co-operation and partnerships between schools.

30. There is an ongoing debate about the scope and application of the Junior Cycle curriculum: the “required” elements of the curriculum can differ between different school types. The Inspectorate’s view is that the Junior Cycle curriculum requires revision and upgrading to ensure greater consistency of application across all schools. There is concern also about the absence of common internal assessment of the Junior Certificate (and Leaving Certificate) programme.

31. The Leaving Certificate Vocational programme is popular and is considered to have been successful in raising the effectiveness and status of vocationally-orientated courses. It is likely that the future development of the Senior Cycle curriculum will result in an increased vocational content. There is less certainty about the educational value of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, which has had a limited uptake - seven thousand out of an examination cohort of sixty thousand in 2000/01. Its main draw back is that it does not lead directly to third level education.

### **National Association of Post-Primary Principals and Deputies**

32. The NAPD was established in 1999 and represents principals and deputy principals in the three school sectors - community comprehensives, voluntary secondary and vocational colleges.

33. The Association is concerned about the absence of a cohesive, holistic planning policy for the development and rationalisation of schools in circumstances of a downturn in pupil population. This is a particular problem in Dublin where fee-paying schools are increasingly drawing pupils away from local secondary schools. The NAPD considers that parental choice should be limited to the local school, with the exception of Irish-medium and special educational needs.

### **Irish Business & Employers Confederation (IBEC)**

34. Generally employers have expressed a high degree of satisfaction about the present schools system, although there would be concerns about language competency, the delivery of science in the curriculum, and competency in IT. Employers would support the development of broad based skills - enterprise, communications, adaptability - with specialist choices in the curriculum being delayed for as long as possible. There has been a re-emergence of interest amongst employers in the application of apprenticeships to support the economy. IBEC believes that the Transition Year programme is well regarded as a useful preparation for life in general, although it was suggested that the programme might be more effective at a later stage in the Senior Cycle.

35. IBEC facilitates an impressive and extensive Business-Education Links programme across some two hundred and fifty post-primary schools. This can involve one to one links or a number of local schools linked with a particular employer. The programme covers work experience for teachers, work placements for students, business appreciation courses, interviewing techniques and dealing with conflict. IBEC regards the development of these school links as a social issue rather than simply as a means of ensuring that there is a better equipped source of employees.

### **National Council for the Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)**

36. This meeting provided some interesting views and commentary on the development of the curriculum and future plans for the implementation of a system of internal assessment. The NCCA, which is soon to be put on a statutory footing under the Education Act 1998, will be instrumental in taking this work forward.

37. The NCCA's view is that direct linkage between the curriculum and assessment is crucial to the effective implementation of the curriculum both at the Junior Cycle and in the Leaving Certificate programmes. A broad-based curriculum is delivered most effectively in the new Community Schools, whereas the voluntary secondary sector, particularly boys' schools, tend to offer a narrower range of courses.

38. There is evidence that in some schools the banding of pupils at Year 1 has a crucial impact on curricular pathways as there can often be little opportunity for subsequent movement between bands. NCCA is also concerned about the inadequacy of the pupil information which transfers from the primary school. This has resulted in the development of informal testing and assessment procedures by post-primary schools.

39. A weakness in the present curriculum is the absence of a common core, specified outcomes and associated, standardised assessment arrangements. NCCA will be giving particular attention to these objectives in the next stages of the review of the curriculum and assessment methods.