
Representatives of the Minister for Education Skills and the Teacher Unions met on 19 February to discuss 'A Way Forward', the proposal circulated by the Independent Chairperson. Both sides requested clarification in relation to aspects of the document. It was agreed that the clarifications provided should be incorporated as appropriate in an amended document which is presented below. For reasons of clarity, the original introduction has been retained. Pauric Travers 23 February 2015

JUNIOR CYCLE REFORM A WAY FORWARD

INTRODUCTION

Representatives of the Minister for Education and Skills and of the Teachers Unions have engaged in prolonged and constructive discussions under my chairmanship on a new structure for teaching, learning and assessment at Junior Cycle. While some progress has been made, no agreement has been possible to date and an *impasse* has been reached. At the request of both parties, I have reflected on the positions advanced by the Minister and her representatives and by the Union groups. I offer the proposals below as worthy of consideration by both sides as the basis of a way forward,

The main part of this document is structured in the form of a draft agreement which it is hoped captures the essential elements of a reformed Junior Cycle. To avoid ambiguity, these elements are elaborated in some detail. In the event that the proposals are acceptable to both sides, further discussions will be needed at a number of levels to finalise matters and make arrangements for implementation. In those circumstances, the agreement provides that the Minister should delay the implementation of the revised specifications for Science and that the Union groups should suspend their industrial action

The proposed reform of the Junior Cycle is based on the need for fundamental changes in our approach to curriculum and assessment to improve the learning experiences of students. Such ambitious reform requires the wholehearted engagement of teachers - otherwise its chances of success are limited. The timing is not propitious. The response of teachers has been influenced by a range of issues – some related to the proposals themselves, others with deeper roots. A decade of rapid social, demographic and educational change followed by salary cuts, deteriorating career structures and casualization have left many teachers alienated and distrustful, even of initiatives which may be to their professional benefit. Addressing such alienation lies beyond the scope of the current process but it is an urgent requirement for the well-being of our schools.

Some of the immediate concerns of teachers about Junior Cycle reform appear more tractable. While the initial reform proposals of the NCCA followed progressive, international practice, they have been criticised for taking too little account of the distinctive Irish educational and cultural context. The well-articulated concern that school-based assessment for certification would

expose the teacher to undue pressure can be addressed and teachers supported. The use of standard descriptors, internal and external moderation and validation, and the continued existence of an independent State examination all offer some protection. Similarly in the area of resources: with schools and teachers working at or near full capacity, the price of meaningful reform may be meaningful support and resources.

Since the current process commenced, there have been thirty three hours of talks at five plenary sessions. I have also met the parties separately on ten occasions. Both sides have expressed support for Junior Cycle reform and for enhancing the quality of the learning experience of students. However there have been significant differences as to how these shared aims can or should be achieved. In early November, the DES tabled a proposal from the Minister which restored state certification of the Junior Cycle and provided for a final examination accounting for 60% of the marks and school based assessment completed in second and third year accounting for 40%. While the Unions agreed that this proposal was significant, they rejected it as it 'did not address the fundamental objection of teachers to school based assessment for certification purposes.'

In recent meetings, the discussions have focussed on trying to honour the core principles of both sides. On the one hand, the Minister's representatives stated as a minimum requirement that assessment should capture the total learning experiences of the student while on the other the Union groups refused to countenance school based assessment for certification. One possible option which would find favour with the Unions would, in effect, abandon school based assessment and broaden the external assessment to include projects and portfolios and other assessment tools in addition to written and oral examinations. The Minister's November proposal represented an alternative approach. Whatever the other merits of these two options, they run counter to the core principles articulated by one or other of the parties.

The way forward suggested below has the advantage of meeting the key stated requirements of the DES and the Union groups. It acknowledges and addresses many of the concerns of teachers while retaining some of the most progressive elements of the original reform proposals. It is by no means an ideal solution but it provides the basis for an honourable settlement. It demands compromise, movement and good-will from all sides. The alternative is continued unrest and untold damage to students, teachers and the education system. I commend it to the parties for their consideration.

Pauric Travers
Independent Chairperson
12 February 2015

Draft Agreement between the DES, ASTI and TUI on the Implementation of Junior Cycle Reform

1. *Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Junior Cycle*
 - 1.1 Junior Cycle should provide students with a broad and balanced learning experience, incorporating the development of a range of knowledge, skills and competences. The Statements of Learning and the Key Skills identified in the *Junior Cycle Framework* (2012) and in the earlier NCCA document *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle* (2011) provide a clear basis for the kind of programme that students need in the twenty-first century.
 - 1.2 Improving assessment at junior cycle will contribute to improving the quality of students' learning. The revised Junior Cycle programme will build on best practice in teaching, learning and assessment already in place in schools and will involve a balanced use of *Assessment for Learning* and *Assessment of Learning*. We recognise that teachers are unwilling to engage in assessment for State certification. We also recognise that State-certification of some elements of assessment has an important role to play. We believe that other elements of assessment need not be State certified, but teachers, parents and students will legitimately expect assurance and support to ensure that this assessment is consistent, equitable and fair across all students and all schools.
 - 1.3 The Junior Cycle programme will encompass learning in subjects or a combination of subjects and short courses. It will also encompass a range of other learning experiences. These are as set out in the *Junior Cycle Framework* (2012), with the following changes:
 - Students will study a maximum of 10 subjects for state certification; each subject will require a minimum of 200 hours of learning other than English, Irish and Mathematics which will require a minimum of 240 hours of learning
 - Schools may offer students the opportunity to take a small number of short courses (using either short courses developed by the NCCA or short courses developed by the school); these short courses will be assessed through school-based assessment and will require 100 hours of learning so that two short courses will be the equivalent of one subject
 - The possible combinations of subjects and short courses will be as described in *Junior Cycle Framework* (2012)
 - It is not the aim or intention that short courses should undermine or replace existing subjects. If necessary, the DES will issue a circular clarifying this matter and advising schools to limit the number of short courses that they offer.
 - Students must also undertake learning in a new area entitled "Well-Being". This area of learning will incorporate Physical Education, SPHE (incorporating RSE) and CSPE.

New programmes will be introduced for each of these elements of Well-Being and 400 hours will be available for the area

- Students may undertake learning in additional subjects that are not for state certification
- As originally envisaged, a range of Level 2 qualifications will be available for students with very significant special educational needs

2. *Assessing and documenting student learning*

- 2.1 Teaching, learning and assessment are inextricably linked and assessment will play an important role in supporting and documenting student learning and achievement across all aspects of the programme in which students engage.
- 2.2 So that assessment can support and document student learning in a balanced range of knowledge, skills and competences, a variety of assessment methods will be used in each subject. For most subjects, these will include:
- A number (maximum two) of school-based assessments completed in second-year and third year and reported upon to students and parents by schools
 - A State-certified examination completed at the end of third year
- 2.3 These arrangements will be adjusted as follows for the suite of technology subjects, Art and Home Economics where practical and performance components currently represent the major part (more than 50%) of assessment for the subject:
- One or two school-based assessments completed in second-year and reported upon to students and parents by schools
 - A short written or practical examination and/or the submission of an artefact or project leading to State certification
 - In order to avoid over-assessment, the total number of school-based assessments and State-certified assessment elements will not exceed three. (See 3.4 below)
- 2.4 The new specifications (syllabus) produced by the NCCA for each subject will incorporate clear details of its assessment arrangements, including details of the knowledge, skills and competences that can be expected of students at different levels of performance.

3 *School-based assessment components within subjects*

- 3.1 School-based components will provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their level of achievement in aspects of each subject.
- 3.2 Normally, a maximum of two such school-based components will be completed and documented over the course of second year and third year.
- 3.3 Typically, the school-based assessment components may include oral performances/presentations; written work of different types; the making of artefacts (e.g. in technology subjects); artistic performances (e.g. in Visual Art, Music, Drama); scientific experiments; projects; or other suitable tasks
- 3.4 School-based components will be defined by the NCCA and will be undertaken by students in a defined time period within class contact time to a national timetable. The NCCA will be requested to ensure that the nature and extent of the components will be realisable within these constraints. They will also be requested to pay particular attention to avoiding 'over-assessment' and the cumulative burden on students and teachers of multiple assessments across the full range of subjects.
- 3.5 School-based components will be assessed by the students' teachers, and reported to students and parents by the school.
- 3.6 To support teachers in the assessment of school-based components and to ensure uniformity of standards and equity of treatment across all students and all schools:
 - Teachers will have available to them the detailed specifications for the subject including guidance on assessment
 - Teachers will have available to them examples of annotated student work at different levels of performance
 - All teachers of each subject involved in teaching and assessing the school-based components in the school will engage in formal *Subject Learning and Assessment Review* meetings where they will compare their assessments of students' work and ensure common approach across the school. Such meetings will take place within time-tabled time
 - Where there is a single teacher of a subject in a school, the teacher can be facilitated to participate in a Subject Learning and Assessment Review meeting in a nearby school

- Assessments will describe the achievement of students using a nationally determined, common set of descriptors (not numerical marks) to describe the student's achievement
- Schools and teachers will be provided with advice and support from an independent Assessment Support Service. This service will:
 - be staffed by experienced, practicing teachers and subject experts who are familiar with the national standards for each subject that will be defined by the NCCA
 - advise schools and teachers on the application of national standards
 - sample school-based components at different levels of performance that have been assessed by teachers within each school and advise the schools whether the assessments are in line with national standards or require adjustment. The sample may include components chosen by the school on which it would like an external opinion.
 - provide advice and assistance to schools and teachers that need assistance in applying the national standards
 - provide a reassurance to schools, teachers, parents and students that national standards are being applied equitably across all schools and students

3.7 Schools will document and report to students and their parents on the students' progress and achievement including the outcomes achieved on the school-based components. A standard template for this school report will be provided.

4 *Examinations*

- 4.1 Externally set and marked examinations of no longer than two hours duration will complement school-based assessment of students' achievements in a maximum of 10 subjects. Typically, the examination will represent a notional 60% of the documented learning for the subject. This will vary for the suite of technology subjects, Art and Home Economics where practical and performance components currently represent the major part of assessment.
- 4.2 The examinations will be set, held and marked by the State Examinations Commission.
- 4.3 The examinations will be held in the month of June in third year.
- 4.4 The NCCA and the SEC will be requested to work in close collaboration to ensure that the examinations assess a broad range of knowledge, skills and competences, and that problematic prediction is avoided.

- 4.5 Student achievement on the examinations will be reported using a set of grades.
- 4.6 Student appeals regarding the State certified examination will be processed as per the current appeals arrangements.
- 4.7 The current provision of the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) will continue for the present. The DES has already signalled that JCSP will be subject to a review at a future date when a substantial proportion of the revised Junior Cycle programme is in place.

5 *Documenting students' overall achievement*

- 5.1 Students will receive a *Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement* at the end of Junior Cycle. This will document comprehensively the learning achievements of the student across all areas of learning.
- 5.2 The *Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement* will document in a common, nationally-determined format:
- The achievement of the student on each of the school-based components within the maximum of 10 subjects studied by the student, as reported by the school and following sampling by the Assessment Support Service
 - The achievement of the student on the examinations as reported by the State Examinations Commission
 - The achievement of the student on short courses as reported by the school
 - The achievement of the student in other areas of learning, including Well-Being and other learning activities engaged in by the student as reported by the school
- 5.3 The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy envisages the introduction of full-cohort standardised testing of English, Mathematics and Science in English-medium schools in second year and of Irish, English, Mathematics and Science in Irish-medium schools. It is envisaged that these tests will be phased in over a period of time. While not a specific element of the revised Junior Cycle programme, it is accepted that the introduction of such testing will have an impact on the cumulative assessment burden referred to in section 3.4 above. Consequently, the Department will review the timing of the phasing of such testing in schools. The implementation of sample-based testing for research studies such as PISA etc. is unaffected by this provision.

5.4 The feasibility of aggregating the levels of performance from school-based components and levels of performance in State certified examinations into a single overall level of achievement for each subject would require further discussion and consideration.

6 *Comprehensive continuing professional development for teachers*

6.1 To ensure the successful implementation of the revised Junior Cycle programme, a comprehensive programme of CPD will be provided to teachers by the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) support service. As previously announced, this will include subject-specific CPD and whole-school CPD. Subject specific CPD will be delivered across a number of years in advance of and during the introduction of each subject.

6.2 In view of the urgency of supporting teachers in implementing the second year English course in the 2015/16 school year, immediate priority will be given to providing CPD for this subject as well as whole-school CPD for Junior Cycle.

7 *Resources*

7.1 It is recognised that additional resources will be required in schools to support the implementation of the revised programme. Further detailed bi-lateral discussions and discussions with all relevant parties in an industrial relations context are required to reach agreement on these resource issues. Both parties to this agreement commit to engaging positively in these discussions which will commence as soon as possible. While the availability of resources is necessarily impacted on by a variety of factors, this agreement is predicated on an understanding that the resources identified and agreed as being necessary will be provided.

8 *Creating the conditions for implementation*

8.1 Acceptance of the way forward outlined in this document requires a number of actions by both sides. These will provide a breathing space and help create the conditions necessary for implementation:

- The union side will suspend all industrial action with immediate effect
- The Minister will delay the implementation of the revised Science specifications to September 2016 in order to facilitate teachers' full engagement in consultation on these specifications

- The delivery of CPD to support the implementation of the revised Junior Cycle will recommence immediately. Priority will be given to an intensive programme to support and equip teachers of English in implementing the revised English specifications introduced in schools in September 2014, and to support whole-school preparation for junior cycle reform
- To provide clarity and guidance for all concerned, the relevant elements of this agreement will be incorporated in a revised edition of *Junior Cycle Framework*, to be issued as soon as practicable by the Department of Education and Skills
- Meaningful Junior Cycle Reform will require significant resources including provision of adequate teacher time. Representatives of the DES, school management authorities and the teacher unions will engage in detailed negotiations regarding the time and resources needed to support implementation of the revised Junior Cycle, the delivery of these resources and the other arrangements necessary
- Implementation of this agreement will be monitored by an implementation committee comprised of representatives of the parties involved and an independent chair

9 *Curriculum Development*

- 9.1. In the first instance, curriculum reform and development are a matter for the NCCA, the statutory agency tasked with that function. Since its establishment, the Council has achieved considerable progress through its partnership approach. The current talks have of necessity brought the reform of the Junior Cycle temporarily into a different forum. It would be desirable that the focus in curriculum matters revert to the NCCA as soon as possible and that any lessons arising from the current dispute should be learned.