

The Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU) wishes to draw attention to sections 2, 3 and 5 of the Programme for Government due to their particular relevance to second-level students. We also wish to highlight some opportunities for the Department of Education with regards to the provision and support for the structures of Student Voice within second-level education.

Section 2

The Irish Second Level Students' Union acknowledges the proposed publishment of the School Completion Strategy. We welcome the introduction of the mandatory school age of 17, and we accept the concepts of extra educational programs and the contribution of the defense forces.

We are gravely concerned regarding the rising third-level fees for third level education, which we believe will grow if it is not addressed, and the hidden costs of second level education, such as the extravagant costs of school books and uniforms.

The Leaving Certificate is increasingly becoming a more unjust assessment method for disadvantaged students who, in contrast to wealthier, more supported students, do not have access to "grinds schools" who charge high fees in exchange of completely exam driven lessons with high quality teachers, and also to 'grinds' themselves, lessons outside of school to aid a student's understanding and knowledge of a subject. Irrespective of how hard disadvantaged students work, the student who can afford these resources is more likely to achieve higher results.

To quote the students who attended a gathering we held a few months ago it is "completely unjust that one student could score higher than the other purely because one had money to fund private lessons". The Leaving Certificate is a system which is neither fair nor equal, and we see it becoming more of a business and more as an opportunity for capital each year, which puts vulnerable students at an even more disadvantage.

Section Three

The Irish Second Level Students' Union welcomes the transfer of some Catholic Schools to new patrons and the School Admissions and Excellence Legislation which will ensure there is fairness in admission to second-level schools. We believe that admission to school should be based on proximity and there should be no discrimination in admission policies.

Section Five

The Irish Second Level Students' Union believes the introduction of subjects such as the arts, entrepreneurial education, mental health and the new Leaving Certificate subject of P.E. as very positive changes and we support these subjects. We are concerned however that they may be poorly implemented depending on the support of the school management and the interest and motivation of teachers.

We support the enhancement of Transition Year and the proposed increase of programs in industry and in colleges for Transition Year students.

However we find the sentence "Guidance Counselling at secondary level will be enhanced" to be unsatisfactory. We would request that the Department have a structured plan and a detailed method of how the amount of guidance counsellors should be increased and how they should be better trained. All guidance counselors should have suitable training and / or qualifications to fulfil their role and this must be included in Whole School Evaluations. We believe guidance counselling is an imperative part of second level, due to restrictive subject

choices and third level admission policies. The ISSU believes that this needs to be a priority in the Strategy for Education.

Outside of the positive actions mentioned above, we believe these eight sections to be very disappointing for second level students. We regret that neither student voice, student complaints, nor students views got any mention throughout the document, despite an entire section entitled “Diversity and Choice to Parents” where parents receive much support to ensure their voices are heard.

The significance of students ideas and opinions should be taken seriously. Student voice can play a hugely important role in the school community, throughout the education sector and in society as a whole. Students are fully capable of articulating their views and providing knowledgeable insights into the world of education from a student’s perspective and the Irish Second Level Students’ Union are well placed, as the national representative body for second level students, to provide a platform for these insights and the views and opinions of students on a national level.

We highlight two opportunities for the Strategy for Education.

1. The amendment of the Education Act to make Student Councils in schools mandatory by law. The implementation and monitoring of this rule could be overseen by the Irish Second Level Students’ Union, who would warrant the creation of democratic, student-led councils, and ensure the eradication of tokenism and inactivity, through inspection and ongoing contact between the union and the student council.
2. The appointment of students as associate members of school boards of management. Some second-level schools have this in place already. This also would be formally described by the Minister in an amendment to the education act. Similar to the way in which parents’ representatives can express parents concerns at meetings, student associate members could represent the interest of students. The ISSU would run specialist cluster training workshop for students associate board members within each region. This would ensure that the student representatives fully understood the workings of and legislation the governing boards of management thus meaning students would be adequately prepared.