



Senior Cycle Redevelopment: Student Well Being as a Catalyst for change and some of the measures to address it.

Broad Welcome

After all the excitement following the response of the Minister of Education to the National Council Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) [Senior Cycle Advisory Report](#) last Tuesday the most insightful conversations were with my staff and parents over the following days.

Over the photocopier and the staff room table young mothers who are also teachers were excited about the changing senior cycle landscape for their own children and for our students. Covid challenges were brushed aside as one teacher told me the announcement of the proposed redevelopment of senior cycle was a highlight of recent times.

Parents asked when would the proposed changes be introduced, and would their children benefit from them? And how, the teachers asked, would all this impact on the Points Race?

Well Being Concerns

There is no doubt the unhealthy obsession with the Leaving Certificate and the so called 'Points Race' students' hopes and dreams were concentrated on very narrow success criteria and pathways and caused unnecessary levels of stress.

This was brought home in the starkest of terms by the UN and more recently by the Children's Ombudsman in Ireland.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child asked Ireland to outline state efforts to reform the Leaving Certificate "[with a view to reducing the stress caused to children](#)" adopted in January 2016 and restated in 2020.

In a hard hitting [address](#) to The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the 9th November 2021, giving his views on Leaving Certificate reform, the Ombudsman for Children, Dr Niall Muldoon, told committee members:

"In 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of Children strongly recommended the reform of the Leaving Certificate due to the disproportionate level of mental stress experienced by young people. I believe that, six years on, the State will fail to show any real progress on the implementation of this recommendation.

At the official launch of the Advisory Report, Beatriz Pont, Senior Analyst Policy Advice and Implementation of the Directorate for Education and Skills of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) who worked with the NCCA acknowledged that Ireland had the 4th highest OECD education completion rates and high student motivation. But she pointed out that we also have the 2nd lowest vocational education and training provision and high student anxiety. And that the *impact of assessment and point- system drive level and shape decisions which acted as a gatekeeper for Higher Education.*

Following widespread consultation by the NCCA over 4 years and the publication of its [Senior Cycle Advisory Report](#) last Tuesday the Minister has responded to the NCCA findings by putting student well-being front and centre in her vision of senior cycle redevelopment.

Vision for Senior Cycle Redevelopment

The Minister's Vision for Senior Cycle was spelt out:

- To Empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st century
- To Enrich the student experience and skillset we have in our current system
- To Embed wellbeing and reduce stress levels for our students

Student Voice

Minister Foley went on to outline a series of checks and balances in the proposed redevelopment of senior cycle that would embed wellbeing and reduce stress levels. One such step, which hasn't got too much attention, is to have Student Voice at the Council Table. The newly established Council of the NCCA is set to welcome a nominee of the Irish Secondary School Union ([ISSU](#)) to its inaugural meeting next week. The Minister commits to 'meaningful engagement with students in process' of curriculum reform.

Spreading the Assessment Load

She also committed to the need to reduce reliance on a single, terminal examination to reduce student stress and to broaden the range of ways in which students will be able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and how these may be applied in real life contexts.

And the Department is determined to spread the assessment load by all subjects to have written exams and additional components, to organise orals and practicals over the spring holidays for 2022, to hold State Examinations Commission (SEC) exams in Paper 1 of both English and Irish.

Alignment of Programmes

Part of the redevelopment will see the barriers in the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational drop and the development of programmes for students with additional needs for real inclusion.

Points Race

What about the Points Race? The gatekeeper of Higher Education which exerts such pressure on the system, down as far as primary level. The JMB in its submission to the NCCA describes the points race as 'universally unloved by educators as it enshrines superficial 'equality' at the expense of true equity. Education is not a preparation for life – it is life'.

Back in November the Minister for Further and Higher Education Simon Harris warned at a [conference organised by the Joint Management Body \(JMB\)](#) on senior cycle reform that universities must review the CAO points system to ensure it recognises a wider range of students' skills or risk losing public funding. The same conference heard of how the Leaving Cert can be reformed to recognise a wider array of learning such as life skills, work experience or apprenticeship modules. The NCCA has been tasked to ensure the availability of appropriate and flexible progression routes from the LCA into education, training and work.

Further, in its Advisory Report the NCCA commits

that Students in senior cycle would have opportunities to develop a range of skills, values and dispositions across the curriculum to support them during their time in school and in progression and transition to life beyond school. Learning in senior cycle would integrate these skills, values and dispositions across the curriculum and prioritise areas for action to support students in embracing life beyond school, including their rights and responsibilities as local, national and global citizens in ethical and sustainable ways. Students will have opportunities to access RSE through a revised SPHE course which will be developed for all students in senior cycle and which will be inclusive, holistic and student-centred, seeking to meet the changing needs of students.

So the Minister has signalled her intention to embed wellbeing and reduce stress levels for our students by spreading the assessment load, reviewing the downward pressure exerted by the points system, introducing assessment components contributing 40% to students overall grade which will demonstrate their knowledge and skills and how these may be applied in real life contexts thereby reducing the reliance on one terminal exam, support more flexible pathways into education, training and the world of work, provide relevant programmes for students with additional needs and finally, ensuring that important lifeskills will be prioritised. And the Minister agrees proper account must be taken of the conducive conditions necessary to make this a success by putting relevant oversight structures in place.

What is the Proposed Timeline?

The last burning question of last week was when will these changes be implemented? The changes will begin as soon as next year. A timeline for the proposed changes is [here](#).

Our senior cycle is regarded as high functioning with a high level of public trust. We have learnt a lot from Junior Cycle Reform. Evolution rather than revolution is the catch phrase.

But we all know things need to change at a systems level in line with best international and national practice from the days of the Leaving Certificate's first iteration as far back as 1924 and the last major change 30 years ago to meet present and future challenges.

Last week, Minister Foley described those of us in education as guardians of the present for future generations and took the first steps to ensuring a more fit for purpose system going forward, one in which our students wellbeing is at the heart of our endeavours.

My teachers, parents and their young sons and daughters deserve no less.

Patricia Gordon

Patricia Gordon is a member of the Association of Managers of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS), the Irish School Heads' Association (ISA); the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC), the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), Chair of the National Curriculum Advisory Group of the Joint Managerial Board (JMB) and Associate on the Leadership Team of Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT).

Patricia was re-appointed to the incoming National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for a four year period from April 2022. She is currently Deputy Chair of the Management Committee of Blackrock Education Centre.