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Principles and general objectives of education

The values of equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy, and respect for human dignity and identity, apply to education in general and are values that have been traditionally accorded respect in society. (NCCA, 2009).

The mission of the Department of Education and Skills is to provide high-quality education, which will: enable individuals to achieve their full potential and to participate fully as members of society, and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development. In pursuit of this mission, the Department has the following high-level goals: provide a quality inclusive school and early years education system, with improved learning outcomes; provide opportunities for up-skilling and re-skilling that meet the needs of individuals and the labour market; provide high quality learning, research and innovation opportunities in the higher education sector; plan and provide appropriate infrastructure for learning environments. A key part of the DES mission over the period 2011-2014 will be to improve standards in literacy and numeracy and ensure that the education system is achieving quality learning outcomes to support life chances of all learners in a fast changing society and workplace. There is the need to ensure that children and young people learn to be effective lifelong learners and develop the capacity to problem solve, and to apply knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts. Furthermore, there is the need to address concerns about ensuring a greater emphasis on critical thinking and a move away from the trend of rote learning. (DES, *Statement of Strategy 2011-2014*).

The National Development Plan 2007-2013 *Transforming Ireland – A Better Quality of Life for All*, sets out the economic and social investment priorities needed to realize the vision of a better quality of life for all. This better quality of life will be achieved by supporting the continued development of a dynamic and internationalized economy and society with a high commitment to international competitiveness, social justice and environmental sustainability. Investment in education, training and up-skilling, broadly termed as investment in human capital, has played a very important role in Ireland's successful economic performance. It has provided a well skilled and flexible labour force and thereby helped make Ireland a major attraction for domestic and foreign enterprises. The objective will still be to ensure access to a very good standard of education and training for all and, in particular, to provide the labour force with the skills and adaptability to meet the challenges of the future. In line with the Lisbon Agenda, the overall policy objective is the development of the Irish economy into one that is knowledge-based, innovation-driven and inclusive. Labour market and education policies will play a significant role in achieving this goal. Two critical areas of focus for skills development and lifelong learning have been identified, i.e.: continuing efforts to expand the workforce, with an appropriate skills-based immigration strategy; and introducing formalized approaches to lifelong learning with priority policy interventions for low-skilled workers in order to foster the continual acquisition of the knowledge, skills and competencies required to meet the demands of an economic environment of constant change. The ongoing relevance of curricula

to changing social and economic needs, allied with the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning, are key factors in ensuring that young people are equipped with the skills for participation in the knowledge society and for active citizenship. They are also central to addressing social inclusion issues and ensuring optimum completion rates in upper second level education. At post-primary level, important objectives are to strengthen the technical and vocational dimensions of curricula, to embed key skills such as learning to learn and ICT, to develop higher order thinking skills, to diversify and strengthen language learning, to modernize the technology subjects at senior cycle, and to increase the take up of the physical sciences at senior cycle. (Government of Ireland, *National Development Plan 2007-2013*).

Improving literacy and numeracy standards is an urgent national priority for the Minister for Education and Skills and the government. Within the framework of the National Strategy 2011-2020 *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*, literacy is viewed as the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media, while numeracy encompasses the ability to use mathematical understanding and skills to solve problems and meet the demands of day-to-day living in complex social settings. Missing out on the skills of literacy and numeracy or failing to develop these skills to the best of each person's capability is not just a loss for the individual: it is also an enormous loss for all of us in Irish society. Mastering the skills of literacy and numeracy brings with it many social, economic and health benefits for the individual and society as a whole. The strategy is premised on the strong belief that developing good literacy and numeracy skills among all young people is fundamental to the life chances of each individual and essential to the quality and equity of Irish society. The Strategy is focused on the actions that the education system can take to ensure that early childhood care and education and primary and second-level schools provide the best possible opportunities for young people to acquire good literacy and numeracy skills. The Strategy aims to ensure that every child leaving the school system understands mathematics and is able to speak, read, write and spell at a level that enables them to participate fully in education and in the local, national and global communities in which they live. The Strategy acknowledges that the education system alone cannot deliver better literacy and numeracy and it envisages a central role for parents and communities in supporting and encouraging children and young people to learn to use and understand literacy and numeracy in their lives. (DES, July 2011).

Laws and other basic regulations concerning education

In accordance with the **Constitution** of 1937, the state has specific constitutional duties concerning education, primarily under Article 42. Foremost among these is to provide for free primary education and to supplement and support other educational initiatives. The State discharges its constitutional duties by disbursing almost all the funding for the education system at first and second levels and by ensuring that the education provided by the schools meets appropriate standards in curriculum and teaching methods. Parents also have constitutional rights in regard to education; parents are acknowledged as the 'primary and natural' educators of their children. In addition, the role in education of the various religious denominations is recognized in the Constitution. The result is a complex interweaving of the rights and responsibilities of the principal interests in education, which requires a careful balancing so that the rights of the child, as student, can be upheld.

The **Education Act No. 51** of 1998, last amended in 2012, complements the constitutional provisions relating to education. The Act was the first comprehensive educational legislation in the history of the state, delineating legislation in relation to all aspects of the education system. The Act places the central features of first- and second-level education (i.e. primary and secondary education) on a statutory basis and clarifies the roles and responsibilities of all of those involved in education including school principals and teachers. It promotes the development of partnership at school level and provides a framework for the development of a supportive and dynamic working environment for teachers. It also explicitly recognizes the roles of the partners in education at a national level in the policy-making process, providing for consultation in a wide range of areas. Many of the provisions of the Act simply codify and standardize what is already happening within schools. However, this serves an important purpose in providing transparency and clarity as regards the rights and responsibilities of each of the stakeholders, as well as facilitating best practice and the effective and efficient use of resources. The Act also provided for the establishment of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

The **Child Care Act** of 1991 acknowledges the links between health and education measures. It provides for consultation with the Minister for Education in regard to regulations concerning the health, safety, welfare and development of pre-school children availing of pre-school services. The **2006 Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations** govern the regulation of preschool services. These preschool services cover a diverse range of provision including full- and part-time daycare, regulated child minding settings and services which operate across a wide range of curricular philosophical bases. Infant classes in the primary schools (age group 4-5 years) come under the same legislative framework as the rest of the primary school system.

The **Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act** of 2004 gives statutory rights to children with disabilities to assessment of their educational needs and provision for those needs in an inclusive setting, unless such a placement is inappropriate or impractical. The Act sets out a range of services which must be provided, including assessments, education plans and support services. The rights of workers with disabilities have been re-enforced by the provisions included in the **Disability Act** of 2006.

The legislation relevant to secondary schooling in Ireland includes the **Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act** of 1924 and subsequent amendments, the Vocational Education Act of 1930 and its amendments, and the Education (Welfare) Act of 2000

The **Vocational Education Act** of 1930 and subsequent amendments, led to the establishment of the regionally-based Vocational Education Committees (VECs). The 2001 Amendment Act broadened the representative element of VECs to include public representatives, parents, teachers, local businesses and a requirement for the VECs to adopt education plans. (CEDEFOP, 2011).

The **Education (Welfare) Act No. 22** of 2000 provides a new statutory framework for promoting regular school attendance and tackling the problems of absenteeism and early school leaving. The Act provides for coordinated supports and

strategies to ensure that young people remain actively involved in education up to early adulthood. The lead role in this is given to the National Educational Welfare Board, a new statutory agency to develop and implement school attendance policy. Education welfare officers throughout the country work in close cooperation with schools, teachers, parents and community/ voluntary bodies with a view to encouraging regular school attendance and developing strategies to reduce absenteeism and early school leaving. The Board maintains a register of children receiving education outside the recognized school structure and assesses the adequacy of such education on an ongoing basis. The Act repealed the School Attendance Acts, 1926 to 1967.

The **Teaching Council Act** of 2001, amended in 2006 and 2012, provides for the establishment of a Teaching Council as an independent statutory agency to promote and maintain best practice in the teaching profession and in the education and training of teachers. The Teaching Council maintains a register of teachers and a code of professional conduct for registered teachers, determines the education and training requirements for the purposes of registration as a teacher, and promotes the continuing education and professional development of teachers, who must be given a significant degree of autonomy in the regulation and development of their profession. The Act also provided for the repeal of the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act, 1914. The Council has been formally established in March 2006.

The **Qualifications (Education and Training) Act** of 1999 established structures for a national framework of qualifications to coordinate awards and promote access, transfer and progression within the both the initial and continuing vocational education and training (VET) system. To implement this process the Act established the National Qualifications Authority, together with the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Further Education and Training Awards Council. The Employment Equality Act of 1998 established the Equality Authority, whose mandate was expanded under the Equal Status Act of 2000, prohibiting discrimination in the provision of education and training services. (CEDEFOP, 2011).

The **University Act No. 24** of 1997 gives effect to the policy commitment in the White Paper of 1995 to: the re-structuring of the National University of Ireland; provision of revised governance structures; provision of a modern framework for interaction between the universities and central government and for accountability to society generally.

The **Institute of Technology Act** of 2006 brings for the first time the country's fourteen Institutes of Technology (which had been established under the Regional Technical Colleges Act of 1992 and Amendment Act of 1994) including the state's largest third-level institute, the Dublin Institute of Technology, under the responsibility of the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Until 2006, the HEA has only had funding responsibility for the seven universities and certain smaller designated institutions.

The School Attendance Act of 1926 and subsequent amendments, obliged parents to ensure that their children attend school from age 6 to age 15 years, unless there is a reasonable excuse – for example, illness, or where the child is receiving suitable elementary education, other than by attending a national or other suitable

school. The minimum school-leaving age has been raised to 16 years (or the completion of three years of post-primary education, whichever is later) under the Education (Welfare) Act of 2000, which replaced the School Attendance Act of 1926.

Administration and management of the education system

The **Department of Education and Skills** (from 1997 to March 2010, the Department of Education and Science; prior to June 1997, the Department of Education) is responsible for the administration of public education. It provides a policy, legislative and funding framework for and supports education and skills development in early childhood settings, primary and post-primary schools, higher education institutions, further education, and adult and second chance education. It provides a range of services directly for the sector. The main functions of the Department include: policy formulation and review; resource allocation and appropriate monitoring of the allocation; evaluation of performance; assurance of quality of the education service; performance of certain executive activities; advice and support to educational management and staff. The Secretary General has overall responsibility for managing the Department of Education and Skills (DES), implementing and monitoring policy and delivering outputs. In managing the Department, the Secretary General is assisted by the Management Advisory Committee (MAC), which includes the Department's eight Assistant Secretaries General, the Chief Inspector and a Director. The MAC meets regularly with the Minister and Minister(s) of State. The DES has three main offices (in Dublin, Athlone and Tullamore) and a network of 10 Regional Offices. It is divided into a number of divisions/sections, and also comprises the National Educational Psychological Service and the Inspectorate.

The **National Educational Psychological Service** (NEPS) was established in 1999 to support the personal, social and educational development of all children in primary and post-primary schools through the application of psychological theory and practice, having particular regard for children with special educational needs. The NEPS is a constituent section of the DES and is structured upon eight regional divisions, with 21 local offices. The **Inspectorate** is responsible for the evaluation of primary and post-primary schools and centres for education and for the provision of advice to the education system and policy makers. The work of the Inspectorate can be categorized broadly as: providing an assurance of quality and public accountability in the education system (through operating an inspection programme in schools and centres for education and through conducting national evaluations on specific aspects of the educational system); promoting best practice and continuing improvement in schools, centres for education and other settings (mainly through advising teachers and principals and through publishing and promoting good practice in schools); and informing the development of national educational policy through providing professional advice to the Department (on areas such as teacher education policy, curriculum and assessment issues, special education policy, and social inclusion policy). Inspectors involved in policy development work closely with the relevant sections/divisions of the DES, such as Teacher Education Section, Special Education Section, the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit, and International Section. The Inspectorate oversees the implementation of periodic National Assessment of English Reading (NAER) and the National Assessment of Mathematics Achievement (NAMA) in primary schools. These assessments are

conducted in a statistically constructed sample of schools on behalf of the DES by the Educational Research Centre. The Inspectorate is also involved in the administration of international assessments.

The **Department of Children and Youth Affairs** (DCYA) was established in June 2011 following a government decision to consolidate a range of functions which were previously responsibilities of the Minister for Health, the Minister for Education and Skills, the Minister for Justice and Law Reform, and the Minister for Community, Rural and *Gaeltacht* Affairs. The Department brings together a number of key areas of policy and provision for children and young people including the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (which was set up in December 2005), the National Educational Welfare Board, the Family Support Agency and, from January 2012, the detention schools operated by the Irish Youth Justice Service.

The **National Council for Curriculum and Assessment** (NCCA) was first established in 1987 to replace the interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB), originally set up in 1984, and became a statutory body in 2001. According to the Education Act 1998, the NCCA advises the Minister for Education on matters relating to the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools and the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum. This advice is generated through engagement with schools and educational settings, with committees and working groups and is informed by research, evaluation and foresight. The Council is a representative structure, the membership of which is determined by the Minister for Education and Skills. The 25 members are appointed by the Minister and come from organizations representing teachers, school managers, parents, employers, trade unions, early childhood education, Irish language interests and third-level education. Other members include representatives of the Department of Education and Skills, the State Examinations Commission and a nominee of the Minister.

The **Teaching Council** was established on a statutory basis in March 2006 to promote teaching as a profession at primary and post-primary levels, and in particular to promote the continuing professional development of teachers, establish and maintain a register of teachers, regulate the teaching profession, and maintain and improve standards of teaching, knowledge, skill and competence. The Council's functions span the entire teaching career, from entry to initial teacher education programmes, accreditation of all programmes leading to teaching qualifications, induction of newly qualified teachers into the profession, and the continuing professional development of teachers throughout their careers.

The **State Examinations Commission**, established by statutory order in March 2003, assumed responsibility for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the state certificate examinations from the then Department of Education and Science from 2003 onwards. The organization is staffed by civil servants and there are five Commissioners appointed by the Minister for Education. The Commission is responsible for the operation of all aspects of the established leaving certificate, leaving certificate vocational programme, leaving certificate applied and junior certificate examinations including written, oral, aural and practical components and assessed course work in some subjects. Certain trade and

professional examinations are also organized. The NCCA is responsible for advising on curriculum and assessment.

The **Higher Education Authority** (HEA) was set up in 1971 with responsibility for furthering the development of higher education, assisting in the coordination of state investment in higher education and preparing proposals for such investment. In addition, the Authority advises the Minister for Education on the need or otherwise for the establishment of new higher education institutions, on the nature and form of those institutions, and on the legislative measures required in relation to their establishment. It is also required to maintain a continuous review of the demand and need for higher education. From 2007, the fourteen Institutes of Technology, including the state's largest third-level institute, the Dublin Institute of Technology, have been placed under the responsibility of HEA.

The **Irish Universities Quality Board**, established in 2002, performs the following core activities in relation to quality assurance (QA) in the university sector: regular external reviews of how effective quality procedures are in Irish universities; provision of information on QA to stakeholders; QA promotion in Irish universities and partnering with the universities on QA initiatives; publication and promotion of national guidelines of good practice on various higher education themes.

The **Higher Education and Training Awards Council** (HETAC), established in June 2001, has statutory award-giving authority for non-university higher education qualifications and is responsible for external quality assurance in the Institutes of Technology. It also sets and monitors standards in the Institutes of Technology and, through it, a transfer network operates whereby students can move from certificate to diploma to degree level depending on examination performance. Qualifications awarded by this body are internationally recognized by academic, professional, trade and craft bodies. Most colleges also have courses leading directly to the examinations of the many professional institutes.

The National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was established on an *ad hoc* basis in October 1991 to develop a comprehensive assessment and certification system for a wide range of vocational programmes with particular reference to the education sector. Its functions were transferred to the **Further Education, Training and Awards Council** (FETAC), set up as a statutory body in June 2001 under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999. Its mission is to make quality assured awards in accordance with national standards within the national framework, creating opportunities for all learners in further education and training to have their achievements recognized, and providing access to systematic progression pathways.

TEASTAS, the Irish National Certification Authority, was established on an interim basis in 1995. Its main function was to advise the Minister on the establishment of an integrated framework of certification for all education and training outside of the universities. It issued two reports in January 1997 and January 1998. These reports contained different proposals for the format for a new authority or authorities that would be responsible for certification and would guarantee quality. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999 is substantially based on the proposals in the second report. The **National Qualifications Authority of Ireland** (NQAI), established in February 2001, has the following three main objectives: (i) the

establishment and maintenance of a framework of qualifications (introduced in 2003, consisting of ten levels and aligned to the European Framework of Qualifications) for the development, recognition and award of qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners; (ii) the establishment and promotion of the maintenance and improvement of the standards of awards of the further and higher education and training sector, other than in the existing universities; and (iii) the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression for learners throughout the span of education and training provision. The Authority works closely with the awards Councils (FETAC and HETAC) on the validation of procedures for access, transfer and progression throughout education and training, award making and quality assurance processes. The NQAI is also responsible for external quality assurance of the Dublin Institute of Technology. At its meeting of 13 January 2010, the government approved the General Scheme of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Bill, which provides for the establishment of an amalgamated qualifications and quality assurance agency, to be known as the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority of Ireland. The NQAI, the HETAC and the FETAC were established in 2001 under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999. The new organization resulting from the amalgamation of the NQAI, HETAC and FETAC is also expected to take responsibility for the external quality assurance review of the universities, a function which is currently performed by the Irish Universities Quality Board and the Higher Education Authority. (DES, March 2011).

Until March 2010, the **National Training and Employment Authority** (FÁS, which replaced the Industrial Training Authority in 1988), under the auspices of the Department of Trade, Enterprise and Innovation, was responsible for: training unemployed people and people in employment either directly in its own network of centres and/or by contracting courses from external providers; ensuring specialist training for people with disabilities; providing placement and guidance services to job changers and the unemployed; and supervising direct employment schemes for those distant from the labour market. In March 2010, the government announced its decision to fundamentally reconfigure departmental responsibilities. Responsibility for FÁS Training and the national Statutory Apprenticeship Scheme were moved to the Department of Education and Skills. In July 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills announced the setting up of a new Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS). The new Authority will coordinate and fund the wide range of training and further education programme in the country and will report to the DES. SOLAS will act as an overarching management structure for further education and training (FET) and will ensure that FET will provide learners and job seekers with new skills needed for jobs in growth areas and away from traditional skills. FÁS will be disbanded and over time FÁS training centres and regional staff will be transferred to the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) – which are also being significantly restructured and rationalized, so that the VECs will ultimately be responsible for the delivery of an integrated FET service. The integration of FET will ensure that unnecessary duplication and fragmentation will not take place. Responsibility for FÁS Employment Services and FÁS Employment Programmes (principally the Community Employment Scheme) were moved to the Department of Social Protection (DSP). A newly established National Employment and Entitlements Service within the DSP will provide a one-stop-shop for people seeking to establish their benefit entitlements and those looking for a job and seeking advice on their

training options. Jobseekers requiring training/education will be referred to the VECs who will play a key role in identifying their best education and training options. (CEDEFOP, 2011).

The **National Council for Special Education** was set up to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children. The Council was first established as an independent statutory body by order of the Minister for Education and Science in December 2003. With effect from 1 October 2005 it was formally established under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. That Act sets out the general functions of the Council as follows: planning and coordinating provision of education and support services to children with special educational needs; disseminating information on best practice concerning the education of children with special educational needs; providing information to parents in relation to the entitlements of children with special educational needs; assessing and reviewing resources required by children with special educational needs; ensuring that progress of students with special educational needs is monitored and reviewed; reviewing education provision for adults with disabilities; advising educational institutions on best practices; consulting with voluntary bodies; conducting research and publishing findings.

There are a number of other bodies, both statutory and non-statutory, which have a relationship with the Department of Education and Skills. The **National Centre for Technology in Education** (NCTE) was established in 1998 under the auspices of the Department to provide advice, support and information on the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in education. The NCTE promotes and supports the integration of ICT in learning and teaching in first and second level schools. With effect from June 2012, the role and functions of the NCTE come under the remit of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). This service is managed by Dublin West Education Centre. The PDST encompasses a number of primary and post-primary support services that have been merged to provide a cross-sectoral support service for schools and teachers.

The **National Educational Welfare Board** was established in 2002 under the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, which emphasizes the promotion of school attendance, participation and retention. In June 2011, the functions of the Board transferred to the newly established Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The Board operates across five regional teams at 31 office locations nationwide. The general task of the Board is to ensure that every child attends a recognized school or otherwise receives a certain minimum education. The Board also has responsibility to conduct research into underlying causes for poor attendance and disseminating results of such research to assist schools in developing codes of behaviour and attendance strategies. Since 2009 the Board has responsibility for the integration of the following school support services: the Home School Community Liaison programme, a school-based preventative strategy that is targeted at pupils who are at risk of not reaching their potential in the education system because of background characteristics that tend to adversely affect pupil attainment and school retention; the School Completion programme, which is targeted at young people between the ages of 4 and 18 years who are at risk of early school leaving; and the Educational Welfare Service, which operates through five regional teams, each of which is headed by a regional manager

who leads a number of senior educational welfare officers, who in turn manage a team of educational welfare officers. The Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers was discontinued with effect from August 2011.

The main roles of the **National Centre for Guidance in Education** (NCGE), an agency of the Department of Education and Skills, are to support and develop guidance practice in all areas of education and to inform the policy of the Department in the field of guidance. The main tasks of the NCGE include: informing the policy of the Department of Education and Skills in matters relating to guidance; promoting and supporting strategies for the provision of guidance and counselling in the context of lifelong learning; developing and evaluating guidance resources; providing support of innovative guidance projects; providing technical advice and information on guidance practice; informing practitioners of developments in guidance; participating in, and providing support for, research into guidance practice and needs; convening national advisory committees to advise on its projects and initiatives; consulting with relevant agencies, organizations and government departments.

Much of the work of evaluation in the education system is assisted and often carried out by the **Educational Research Centre** (ERC), which is located on the campus of St. Patrick's College of Education, Dublin. In recent years, the ERC has been involved in a number of national and international studies, analyses of the junior and leaving certificate examinations, assessments in relation to literacy and numeracy, and the Home School Community Liaison Scheme. In international terms, the ERC has been and is involved in ongoing work on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). (Eurydice, 2009/10).

While certain categories of schools, such as community and model schools, are the property of the Minister for Education, Irish schools, in the main, are owned not by the state, but by community groups, traditionally religious groups (although, more recently, schools have been formed under the aegis of other groups, in particular all-Irish and multi-denominational groups) and vocational education committees. Schools are managed by Boards of Management, representative of the owners/trustees, teachers and parents, by individual managers, appointed by the owners/trustees, or by **Vocational Education Committees** (VECs)**,** which act as an intermediate administrative tier and oversee a wide range of educational services in the vocational sector.

Adult learning is the responsibility of the Further Education Section of the DES. The White Paper on Adult Education *Learning for Life*, published in 2000, defined adult education as any systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training. The concept includes: re-entry by adults to further education; re-entry by adults to third level education; continuing education and training and professional development of people in or re-entering the workforce, regardless of the level; community education; other systematic learning undertaken by adults in a variety of settings and contexts, both formal and informal. An extensive consultation process informed the White Paper and marked the adoption of lifelong learning as the governing principle of educational policy. In early 2010 the DES was given responsibility for skills and training policy in addition to its existing responsibility for further education which includes adult education and postsecondary

education for young people who have recently completed upper secondary education. The DES supervises and funds further vocational education colleges and adult education centres run by the 33 VECs. These have devolved responsibility for a range of continuing vocational educational programmes. (CEDEFOP, 2011). The overall number of VECs is to be reduced from 33 to 16 through the merger of particular counties. (DES, March 2011). Support services are also provided through voluntary bodies funded by the DES, such as the **National Association for Adult Education** (AONTAS) and the **National Adult Literacy Agency**.

The vast majority of preschool playgroups are privately owned. Primary schools and many post-primary schools are locally owned and managed. Almost all primary schools are denominationally owned and controlled. Since the 1970s, in response to parental demand, a number of multi-denominational primary schools have been established. Responsibility for the management of primary and post-primary schools rests in the first instance with the **board of management** which includes patron, parent and teacher representatives. Schools have relatively limited autonomy especially in relation to curriculum and the pedagogical methods employed. The four broad types of post-primary school (voluntary secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive) are to varying extents centrally administered from the DES. The only legally constituted local administration of post-primary education is for those vocational schools and colleges administered by the VECs. The large majority of voluntary secondary schools (which enrolled about 54% of all post-primary students in 2008/09) are Roman Catholic and most of the remainder are under the umbrella of a protestant management body. The **Association of Comprehensive and Community Schools** acts as an advisory and supportive agency to these schools. (Eurydice, 2009/10).

According to the Education Act amended in 2012, the **principal** of a recognized school (appointed by the board) shall: be responsible for the day-to-day management of the school, and be accountable to the board of the school for that management; provide leadership to the teachers and other staff and the students of the school; be responsible, together with the board, parents of students and the teachers, for the creation in the school of an environment which is supportive of learning among the students and which promotes the professional development of the teachers; under the direction of the board, and in consultation with the teachers, the parents and, to the extent appropriate to their age and experience, the students, set objectives for the school and monitor the achievement of those objectives; and encourage the involvement of parents of students in the school in the education of those students and in the achievement of the objectives of the school.

The Education Act 1998 entitles post-primary school students to establish a **student council** with the support of the school board of management. The **National Parents Council–Primary** is the nation-wide organization representing parents of children attending early and primary education. It is recognized by the Education Act 1998 as the body representing the parents of children in early and primary education. Its aim is to improve and enrich the education of all children and support parents to get involved in their children's learning at home, in the community and at school. The **National Parents Council (Post-primary)** is a confederation of voluntary organizations representing parents of post-primary school students. (Eurydice, 2009/10).

Structure and organization of the education system

Ireland: structure of the education system
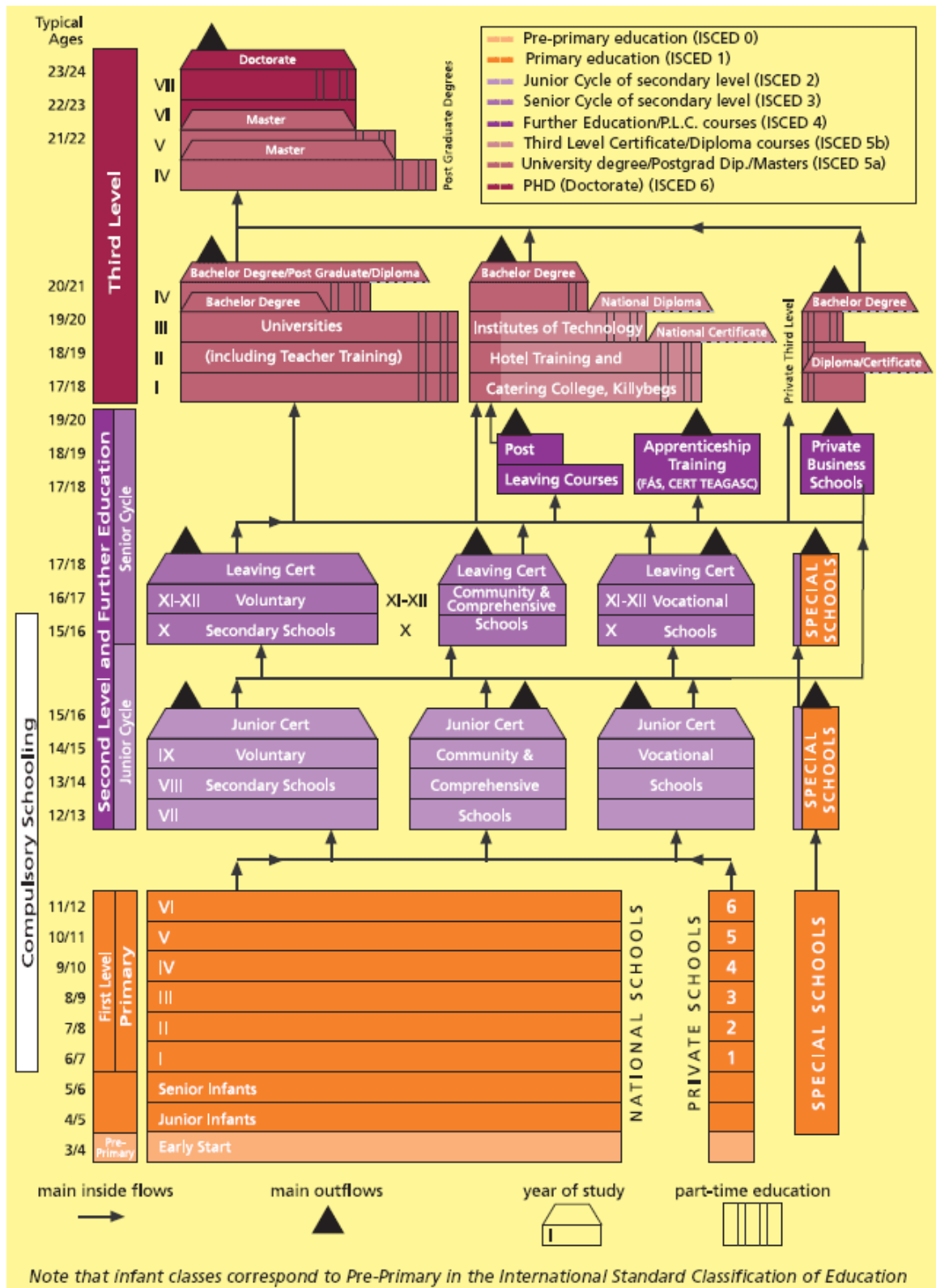
Source: Department of Education and Science, 2004.

Compiled by UNESCO-IBE (http://www.ibe.unesco.org/)

Pre-school education

The preschool is an integral part of the primary school to which it is attached and operates within the general framework of the primary school system. Although children in Ireland are not obliged to attend school until the age of 6, nearly half (44.4% in 2008/09) of 4-year-olds and almost all 5-year-olds are enrolled in infant classes in primary schools. Preschool education is provided in the main by privately funded childcare facilities. The Universal Preschool Provision, an initiative introduced in January 2010 and funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, provides for free preschool (three hours a day for 38 weeks or two hours and 15 minutes a day for 50 weeks) for children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months in September of the relevant year. The universal preschool year is delivered in a variety of childcare and early education settings.

Primary education

As children may be enrolled in primary education on their fourth birthday, primary schools accommodate an age group which in most countries is considered preschool or nursery. The typical primary school divides pupils by age into eight year-groups or standards ranging from junior and senior infants to sixth class. The normal age for completing primary education is 12 years. The primary education sector comprises primary schools, special schools and non-aided private primary schools. Primary schools are required by the Department of Education and Science Circular No. 138/2006 to assess achievement in English reading and mathematics at the end of first class (i.e. grade/standard 1) or the beginning of second class, and at the end of fourth class or the beginning of fifth class using standardized tests. Within the framework of the National Strategy 2011-2020 *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*, with effect from 2012 onwards all primary schools and all Irish-medium primary schools are required to administer standardized tests of English reading, mathematics and Irish reading (in the case of Irish-medium schools) to all eligible pupils at the end of second, fourth and sixth class.

Secondary education

Secondary education consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two- or three-year senior cycle. The second-level sector comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Upon completion of the compulsory junior cycle students sit the Junior Certificate examination (placed at Level 3 in the National Framework of Qualifications–NFQ) managed and administered by the State Examinations Commission. Most examinable subjects are offered at two levels (ordinary and higher) and two subjects (mathematics and Irish) are offered at three levels, i.e. higher, ordinary and foundation. Within the framework of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2020, (tentatively) by 2014/15 all post-primary schools and all Irish-medium post-primary schools will be required to administer standardized tests of English reading, mathematics and Irish reading (in the case of Irish-medium schools) to all eligible students at the end of second year of the junior cycle. The senior cycle caters to students in the 15-18-year-old age group. In the senior cycle there is an optional one-year Transition Year Programme followed by a choice of three two-year Leaving Certificate programmes: the Leaving Certificate (established), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), and the Leaving Certificate

Vocational Programme (LCVP). The focus of the established Leaving Certificate (LC), followed by the majority of students, is primarily academic and its main emphasis is on providing students with the necessary education required for entry into third-level and higher education. The LCA is structured around three elements, i.e. vocational preparation, vocational education and general education; on completion of the programme, participants generally proceed to post-LC vocational education and training courses or directly to the labour market. The LCVP is vocational in nature and its objective is to prepare learners for further and continuing education and for the world of work. The LCVP is based on combinations of LC (established) subjects (two of which must be vocational) and students must take three link modules in enterprise education, preparation for the world of work and work experience. Students normally sit the leaving examination at the age of 17 or 18, after five or six years of post-primary education. The Leaving Certificate is placed across Levels 4 and 5 in the NFQ. An increasing number of courses are available to students on completion of second-level education (age 17+). These courses are organized mainly in vocational schools and offer a wide variety from repeat LC courses, vocational preparation courses and pre-third level courses. Post-LC courses are of either one or two years' duration.

Higher education

The higher education or third-level sector comprises the universities, the institutes of technology, the colleges of education as well as some non-state-aided private higher education colleges. For both degree and non-degree programmes one year prior to admission to third-level institutions students must apply to the Central Applications Office (CAO); the third-level institutions then select candidates themselves who have been accepted by the CAO. Non-degree programmes include one-year foundation certificates and the two-year higher certificate programmes (Level 6 in the NFQ) offered at the institutes of technology. Higher certificate holders are generally exempted from the first year, or the first two years, of a bachelor's degree programme. The former three-year national diploma programmes have been merged with the ordinary bachelor's degree programmes. The duration of programmes leading to the first degree (i.e. the bachelor's degree, awarded at Level 7 in the NFQ) is usually three years (four years for a bachelor's with honours, awarded at Level 8 in the NFQ). First-degree programmes in engineering, law, pharmacology, and science generally take four years to complete (five years in the case of architecture, dental science and veterinary, and six years in the case of medicine). A higher diploma (Level 8 in the NFQ) is normally awarded after one year of study following the bachelor's degree. A postgraduate diploma (Level 9 in the NFQ) usually takes one year to complete. Programmes leading to the master's degree (Level 9 in the NFQ) require one to two years of study and can be based either on teaching and examinations or research. The Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) is a research programme usually lasting two years and involving little to no coursework; the M.Phil. is often used as a stepping stone to the the Doctor of Philosophy programme (Level 10 in the NFQ). At least two years of study and research as well as the completion of a doctoral thesis are normally required for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) and four years for a higher doctorate, such as Doctor of Science (D.Sc.) or Doctor of Literature (D.Litt.).

The vast majority of primary schools operate a year from the beginning of September to the end of June, for a total of 183 official school days, usually including

a number of in-service days for teachers for which the pupils are not at school. The private primary schools normally have a shorter school year. Primary schools normally operate five days a week, Monday to Friday. At the discretion of the Board of Management, secondary schools may operate a five- or six-day week (some boarding schools). Schools adopting a five-day week must operate a minimum of 167 days a year, while those operating a six-day week are required to provide instruction for a minimum of 187 days a year. Post-primary schools are also in operation when normal instruction may not be taking place. For example, twelve days are allowed for the holding of the state examinations (Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations). These examinations are generally held during three weeks in June starting on the Wednesday following the public holiday Monday. Post-primary schools are also permitted to take two days out of the minimum of 167 days for teacher in-service on an annual basis. Traditionally, tertiary-level institutions were organized on a three-term teaching basis. In recent years, universities have been moving to a two-semester academic year and to modularization of course design, with teaching generally conducted over a 24-26 week period. (Eurydice, 2009/10). The DES Circular No. 34/2011 provides for the standardization of the breaks at Christmas, Easter and mid-term in the first and second terms for the school years 2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14, within the overall requirement for a school to be open for a minimum of 167 days at post-primary level and 183 days at primary level.

The educational process

In 1922, the government of the new state sought to give the Irish language and culture a suitable place in the programme of primary schools, in line with 'Irish ideals and sensibilities. The programme set the curricular framework in the primary schools for nearly half a century. The pedagogical principles and the subject-based structure of the pre-1922 curriculum were retained. The content of the curriculum between 1922 and 1971 was based on the reality that schooling would cease for many children at age 14, when they would go directly into the world of work. It was also heavily influenced by the role demanded of the schools in transmitting the national and cultural heritage, including in particular the Irish language. The curriculum followed in most primary schools consisted of the following obligatory subjects: Irish, English, mathematics, history, geography, needlework (for girls), music and religious Instruction. The content, methodology and attainment targets for each standard (year/grade level) were centrally prescribed with the exception of religious instruction, which was prescribed by the appropriate denominational authorities. In 1967, new policy departures in relation to both first and second level were to transform the role of primary schools in the education system, and post-primary education was to be made available to all children without payment of fees. In 1971 a new progressive and innovative curriculum for primary schools was introduced, which was in operation until 1999 when the Primary School Curriculum was launched. While reflecting many of the principles of the 1971 curriculum (including the child-centred principles), the 1999 Primary School Curriculum incorporates the most advanced educational thinking and innovative pedagogical practices in contrast with the content-based 1971 curriculum. The 1999 curriculum also places a renewed focus on planning, assessment, flexibility, and teacher autonomy. All teachers received comprehensive in-career development in relation to the implementation of the 1999 curriculum. The Primary School Curriculum 1999 was implemented on a phased basis between 1999 and 2007. During the implementation phase, the academic year 2003/04 was set aside as a year of

consolidation and review to help schools and policy makers take stock of the progress made to date on the subjects implemented. To this end, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has been engaged in an ongoing review of the curriculum, looking at the effects and impact of implementation to date and advising on the further implementation of the curriculum. (Eurydice, 2009/10).

The process of revising the curriculum began with the work of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum, which published its report in May 1990. The report constituted a detailed appraisal of the 1971 curriculum and provided the basis for the redesign and restructuring that is presented in the 1999 curriculum. The development of a revised primary curriculum became the responsibility of the NCCA, whose function it is to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on matters of curriculum and assessment. The NCCA established committees representing all the principal partners and interests in primary education to draw up subject statements and teacher guidelines in each of six curriculum areas (language; mathematics; social environmental and scientific education; arts education; physical education; and social, personal and health education). The development and implementation of the curriculum in religious education in primary schools remains the responsibility of the different church authorities. The Primary School Curriculum 1999 constitutes a detailed interpretation of the recommendations of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum. It encompasses the philosophical thrust of the 1971 curriculum, and reflects the thinking and aspirations of the National Convention on Education (1994), the White Paper on Education *Charting our Education Future* (1995) and the Education Act (1998). (DES & NCCA, 1999).

The 1999 curriculum recognizes the importance of developing the full potential of the child. It seeks to develop children spiritually and morally and to foster in each child an ethical sense that will enable him or her to acquire values on which to base choices and form attitudes; it endeavours to equip children with the knowledge and skills that will serve them not only in their lives as children but later as adults; it is concerned to develop their capacity for creative expression and response; and it promotes their emotional and physical development. In a rapidly changing society effective interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and skills in communication are essential for personal, social and educational fulfilment. The ability to think critically, to apply learning and to develop flexibility and creativity are also important factors in the success of the child's life. The curriculum places a particular emphasis on promoting these skills and abilities so that children may cope successfully with change. An important goal of the curriculum is to enable children to learn how to learn, and to develop an appreciation of the value and practice of lifelong learning. The curriculum aims to instil a love of learning that will remain with the child through all stages of formal education and that will express itself in an enquiring mind and a heightened curiosity. (*Ibid.*).

The curriculum provides a national framework that defines learning outcomes appropriate to primary school children. It is designed to give children the opportunity to attain the maximum standards in knowledge, concepts and skills consonant with their intelligence, capacity and circumstances. The principles of the full and harmonious development of the child and of making allowance for individual difference are redefined in the broader concepts of celebrating the uniqueness of the child and ensuring the development of the child's full potential. The three pedagogical

principles dealing with activity and discovery methods, an integrated curriculum and environment-based learning are subsumed into a wider range of learning principles that help to characterize more fully the learning process that the revised curriculum envisages. The more important of these are: the child's sense of wonder and natural curiosity is a primary motivating factor in learning; the child is an active agent in his or her learning; learning is developmental in nature; the child's existing knowledge and experience form the base for learning; the child's immediate environment provides the context for learning; learning should involve guided activity and discovery methods; language is central in the learning process; the child should perceive the aesthetic dimension in learning; social and emotional dimensions are important factors in learning; learning is most effective when it is integrated; skills that facilitate the transfer of learning should be fostered; higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills should be developed; collaborative learning should feature in the learning process; the range of individual difference should be taken into account in the learning process; and assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning.

Assessment encompasses the diverse aspects of learning: the cognitive, the creative, the affective, the physical and the social. In addition to the products of learning, the strategies, procedures and stages in the process of learning are assessed. Assessment includes the child's growth in self-esteem, interpersonal and intrapersonal behaviour, and the acquisition of a wide range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. In order to take account of the breadth and variety of learning it offers, the curriculum contains a varied range of assessment tools. These range from informal tools such as teacher observation, class work, homework and discussion with pupils to more formal tools such as diagnostic tests and standardized tests. Assessment tools such as projects, portfolios and curriculum profiles that can be used to link formal and informal approaches are also recommended. It is intended that in planning teaching, learning and assessment procedures, schools and teachers will select those that best meet their needs at a particular time. (*Ibid.*).

The Primary School Curriculum 1999 is organized into the following learning areas, some of which are further subdivided into subjects: language (Irish and English); mathematics; social, environmental and scientific education (SESE, including history, geography and science education); arts education (including music, visual arts and drama); physical education; and social, personal and health education (SPHE, including relationships and sexuality education). The development of curriculum for religious education remains the responsibility of the different church authorities. Each curriculum statement has a similar structure and similar components. These include: introduction; aims; broad objectives; overview tables; content; concepts and skills development; guidance on the selection of content; and assessment statement. The principal division of content in each subject is the strand, and the number of strands varies with the nature of the content in a particular subject and curriculum area. The strand unit is a subdivision of the strand and focuses on the more specific areas of learning that will achieve the developmental goals of the strand. Each strand incorporates detailed content objectives. These encompass the learning experiences and the activities that enable the child to acquire and develop the knowledge and understanding that the strands and strand units address. In many cases the content objectives are further elucidated by exemplars. Summaries of the skills and concepts to be developed at the different class levels are also presented. The strands are not discrete areas of learning, as they overlap and interact to form a

holistic learning experience for the child. They will also assist teachers in identifying possibilities for integrated learning within subjects and curriculum areas, and throughout the curriculum as a whole. At the end of each curriculum statement, the purposes of assessment are delineated, and several approaches and recommended tools are explained. Detailed advice on curriculum, organizational and classroom planning is offered for each subject area in the teacher guidelines. A collaborative approach is advocated, and schools are encouraged to involve parents, the board of management and the wider school community in the planning process, where it is appropriate. Curriculum documents (including curriculum objectives and strands/strand units) and teacher guidelines (including advice on planning, teaching and assessment) are provided for each subject. Added to the Introduction, these comprise 23 books in all. (*Ibid.*).

The NCCA initiated a review of the Primary School Curriculum in September 2003. The review focused on teachers' and children's experiences with the English curriculum, the visual arts curriculum, and the mathematics curriculum. Teachers reported difficulty in understanding the English strands and using them to plan for and to teach the English curriculum. They identified three challenges for assessment in the English curriculum namely, time, appropriateness of assessment tools, and catering for the range of children's abilities in English. Teachers reported that the structure and layout of the visual arts curriculum according to the six strands and two strand units facilitated their planning and teaching in visual arts. They identified three challenges for assessment in the visual arts curriculum namely, time, the appropriateness of assessment in visual arts, and teachers' knowledge of visual arts assessment. Class size and classroom space were reported as teachers' greatest challenges in implementing the visual arts Curriculum, followed by insufficient time for visual arts. With regard to mathematics, data was the strand which teachers reported as being the least useful across most class levels, with shape and space in the case of first and second classes. Teachers identified three challenges for assessment in the mathematics curriculum, namely, time, appropriateness of assessment tools, and catering for the range of children's ability in mathematics. The integrated nature of the Primary School Curriculum should be exemplified for teachers to a much greater extent than it currently is in the curriculum documents. This should help alleviate the time pressures experienced by teachers and should also support the development of children's English language skills throughout the day, in all curriculum subjects, rather than in a discrete manner through English alone. (NCCA, 2005).

In September 2006 the NCCA initiated a second phase of review of the primary school curriculum. The review focused on the experiences of principals, teachers, parents and children with Irish (*Gaeilge*), the science curriculum, and the social, personal and health education (SPHE) curriculum. Across the three subjects, teachers identified time as one of the greatest challenges of curriculum implementation. Teachers described two key dimensions of the time issue. One focused on perceived curriculum overload (insufficient time to fully implement all curriculum subjects), while another focused on class size/children's needs (insufficient time to meet the needs of all learners). Across the three subjects, resources were also identified as one of the greatest challenges of curriculum implementation. Across the three subjects, teacher questioning remains the most frequently used informal assessment strategy; this mirrors the findings of the 2003 review. (NCCA, 2008).

The Draft Plan for Literacy and Numeracy has pointed to the need for a much greater focus to be placed on literacy and numeracy in the curriculum. It has also pointed to the need for much more systematic use of assessment data both at school level and nationally. Revision of the English curriculum at the primary and junior cycle phases, to make more explicit the levels of attainment required at various stages, and more standardized assessments in primary and post-primary schools are also key objectives in the Literacy and Numeracy Plan. Further, there will be a realignment of the curriculum in infant classes (4-6-year-olds) with the early childhood curriculum framework (*Aistear*) announced in 2009 putting a greater emphasis on early language and numeracy development. Good-quality learning activities of the sort recommended in *Aistear* can make a very significant contribution to improving children's acquisition of literacy and numeracy. The revised curriculum should also take account of provision in the free preschool year. As part of this initiative, there is to be an increase in primary school time dedicated to literacy to numeracy (by three hours) at the expense of other subjects. More recent curricular development at the post-primary level has adopted a 'learning outcomes' design in which the expected learning outcomes to be achieved are clearly stated. The syllabus that is being developed and implemented in post-primary schools for *Project Maths* has set out clear learning outcomes for students. However, the current junior cycle syllabus for English was developed over twenty years ago and was not written using a learning outcomes approach. Experience has also shown that the design of this syllabus and the related state examinations may have inadvertently led to a significant narrowing of the range and scope of the learning experienced by students. A 'learning outcomes' approach needs to be incorporated into all curriculum statements at primary level and in all new syllabuses at post-primary levels as they come on stream. Curricula should state clearly the skills and competences expected of learners at six points in their development (end of early years/infants, end of second class, end of fourth class, end of primary stage, end of junior cycle and end of senior cycle). (DES, July 2011).

In 2009 the Minister of Education asked the NCCA to review the junior certificate and advise on the scope for reform which would provide for a more active learning experience for students, the promotion of real understanding, creativity and innovation, and which will provide appropriate evidence of learning in a context where the Junior Certificate is no longer being a high stakes environment. It is important also that the needs of those students who are currently disengaged from learning are addressed. Concerns were highlighted about students being overstressed, taking 10 to 15 examination subjects in the Junior Certificate, and about the examination having a negative backwash effect on their learning experiences by year 3 of the cycle. There are concerns also about curriculum overload, and rote learning. The NCCA published a consultation paper *Innovation and identity – Ideas for a new junior cycle*, which set out a range of possible directions ranging from small to medium to significant levels of change. (*Ibid.*).

In April 2010 a symposium on the future of junior cycle marked the launch of the consultation paper *Innovation and identity*. The consultation was intended to generate discussion and debate amongst the education partners and the wider public on ideas for developing junior cycle. Those who contributed to the consultation were generally in agreement that there is a need for a core curriculum that all students should be able to access irrespective of school type. Inevitably however, there was little agreement on what should be in the core. To address curriculum overcrowding

and allow time for deepened understanding, active learning and the development of literacy and numeracy and key skills in a new junior cycle, content within subjects should be reduced. There was broad agreement that a new junior cycle must incorporate more learning that is practically focused and engages students actively in their learning. Some submissions advocated a significant shift in the junior cycle from subject-bound learning to interdisciplinary learning via integrated themes. Of note is that these submissions came from organizations and agencies external to the school system. Respondents welcomed the emphasis on basic and key skills in the consultation paper. A shift towards a more focused development of both basic (literacy and numeracy) and key skills is viewed as one of the most important elements of the reform process. A range of submissions suggested that a reformed experience of junior cycle education should provide more opportunities for learning outside the classroom and recognition or affirmation of that learning in some way. In meetings and written submissions three elements were consistently identified as being at the heart of a more enriching and engaging learning experience - active learning methodologies, cross-curricular learning, and the development of key skills. The weaknesses of the current examination system generated lots of discussion and commentary in the course of the consultation. A majority of students was critical of the Junior Certificate examination for putting too much pressure on students and for testing their memory rather than their understanding of a subject. Teachers too recognized the limitations of the current Junior Certificate exam particularly in regard to meeting the needs of all students. (NCCA, February 2011).

It is anticipated that a new junior cycle will be introduced in all schools on a phased basis from 2014. In 2017, the first cohort of students will complete the new junior cycle and gain the new qualifications. The key curriculum principles of the new junior cycle will be: quality; well-being; creativity and innovation; choice and flexibility; engagement, relevance and enjoyment; inclusive education; continuity; and lifelong learning. To support schools in developing a high quality junior cycle programme that meets the needs of their students and that provides a close fit with the context, environment and community of the school, a Framework for Junior Cycle will be introduced. The Framework will have a clear and concise description of what it is that students should learn. This is expressed in 24 statements of learning. The statements of learning describe what it is essential for students to know, understand, value and be able to do as a result of their time in junior cycle. Given that schools will be planning their own programmes, these statements provide the basis for consistency between schools and for the monitoring and evaluation of the work of schools. Engagement with the statements of learning will be built around three curriculum components: subjects, short courses, and for the small group of students working towards a Level 2 qualification, Priority Learning Units (PLUs), which will address special learning needs and will include areas such as communication and literacy, numeracy, personal care, living in a community, and preparing for working life. The NCCA will provide the curriculum specifications for subjects and these will be outcomes-based and in most cases at a common level. English, Irish and mathematics will be specified at two levels. The learning outcomes in these specifications will be less extensive and detailed than at present and will be designed for approximately 200 hours of learner engagement. The 200 hours should be viewed as a minimum and does not preclude a school devoting more time where it is needed or desired. To promote the development of literacy and numeracy skills, English, Irish, and mathematics will be designed for a minimum of 240 hours of engagement. The increased focus on

literacy and numeracy across the curriculum will also contribute significantly to learning in these areas. Short courses will be about half the size of subjects (i.e. 100 hours) and will be based on a particular focus or area of competence. The NCCA will produce specifications for six short courses and schools will be able to develop their own courses using a template designed by the NCCA. As in the case of subjects, the specifications will set out the aims and learning outcomes of the course (including embedded key skills), how evidence of learning will be generated, gathered, judged and reported on, and how that evidence can contribute towards junior cycle qualifications. It is envisaged that short courses will be introduced at an early stage in the junior cycle developments. (NCCA, 2011).

The key skills of junior cycle will be embedded in the learning outcomes of the subject. Key skills have become the focus of developments at all levels of education systems around the world. In junior cycle, while specific skills are encountered in subjects and short courses, key skills have a role to play in deepening the students' learning and in making them more self-aware as learners. The key skills of junior cycle are grounded in both national and international research and practice. The selection of key skills at junior cycle also reflects the importance of making and maintaining connections with skill development in the other phases of education. Early childhood and primary education emphasizes self-help skills, communication skills, thinking skills, skills of cooperation, creative thinking, problem-solving skills, and inquiry skills. Increasingly, at senior cycle skills such as critical and creative thinking, communicating, information processing, being personally effective and working with others are being introduced. While the key skills of junior cycle have been developed with the junior cycle learner as the main focus, they are also connected to the skills at senior cycle and the skills already developed in early childhood and primary education. The skills have a particular value for first year students, allowing them to consolidate what they have learned in primary school and to develop skills that will give them a strong foundation for second and third year. The key skills of junior cycle are: managing myself, staying well, communicating, being creative, working with others, managing information and thinking. The key skills will be embedded in the learning outcomes of all curriculum specifications and teachers will be encouraged to build them into their class planning, their teaching approaches and into assessment. The key skills also support the development of literacy and numeracy, which are crucial for learners in accessing the curriculum and in their future life chances. The subjects and short courses related to language and mathematics in particular will contribute directly to the development of literacy and numeracy skills. On a broader front, learning outcomes related to all curriculum components promote the integrated development of literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum as well as promoting key skills learning. Schools will design their own junior cycle programmes and each programme will be made up of the particular combination of subjects, short courses, key skills (or PLUs) with which the student will engage during their junior cycle. The programme has to be consistent with the Framework but, beyond that, schools will be free to decide what should be included in their junior cycle and how it should be organized.

In the new junior cycle the Junior Certificate will be replaced by two new qualifications: a National Certificate of Junior Cycle Education (Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications—NFQ—, as the current junior certificate) and a new Level 2 qualification intended to meet the needs of those who have special

learning needs, for whom a qualification at Level 3 may prove too challenging.. In the case of the Level 3 qualification, students will present evidence of learning in: eight subjects or seven subjects and two short courses; or six subjects and four short courses. Evidence of learning must be presented in the subjects English, Irish (except where exemptions apply) and mathematics. Grading will be on the basis of four or five grading points e.g. not achieved, pass, merit, distinction. Subjects will have two assessment components: a terminal examination with a weighting of 60%, set and marked externally by the State Examinations Commission (SEC); a portfolio with a weighting of 40%, this will vary across subjects. Schools will review and verify marks internally. Results will be provisional and externally moderation on a sample basis by the SEC. The NCCA/SEC will specify assessment arrangements and provide sample assessment materials. Short courses will have a single assessment component, a portfolio based on school work which will vary across courses. This will be underpinned by national guidelines and marked internally by the school. It will not be subject to external moderation. The school will issue results to the SEC for inclusion on the certificate. The awarding body will be the SEC. (*Ibid.*).

The NCCA is also reviewing senior cycle education. The development of new subjects and courses and the review of existing subjects are informed by a vision of creative, resourceful, confident and actively involved young people who are prepared for a future of learning. Debates on skills needs and competence frameworks, combined with the outcomes of consultations on senior cycle, have resulted in the development of a key skills framework for senior cycle. While both terms, skills and competences, are used internationally, the term 'key skills' gained approval during the consultation. The five key skills are: information processing; being personally effective; communicating; critical and creative thinking; and working with others. The embedding of these key skills in curriculum and assessment helps learners to think critically and creatively, to innovate and adapt to change, to work independently and in a team, and to reflect on their learning. In addition, they support mastery of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy which are crucial for learners to access the curriculum and for their future life chances. The principles of senior cycle education that inform curriculum planning, development, provision and implementation in schools are similar to those of the new junior cycle (e.g. quality; well-being; creativity and innovation; choice and flexibility; participation, relevance and enjoyment; inclusive education; continuity; and lifelong learning). New arrangements arising out of ongoing developments at senior cycle will offer a wider range of curriculum components, including transition units, short courses and subjects, which can be combined by schools and learners to provide a two or three year programme of study. Programmes of study provided by schools will reflect a broad curriculum that can also allow for and incorporate a degree of specialization. Programmes will be characterized by choice and flexibility and will be available to all senior cycle learners. Subjects are the most familiar of the curriculum components and are designed as 180-hour courses of study, usually taken on an optional basis. As existing subjects are revised or as new subjects are developed, a strong emphasis is placed on what is learned and how it is learned. All subjects are examined by the SEC. Short courses are proposed as new 90-hour optional courses. These would also be examined by the SEC. Transition units are 45-hour courses, developed and assessed by schools. They build on successful modules already provided by schools as part of Transition Year programmes. (NCCA, 2009).

All revised and new senior cycle syllabuses for subjects and short courses follow a common format. This will help teachers, learners and parents to see similarities and differences between subjects. The content of all revised and new senior cycle syllabuses is expressed in learning outcomes. The learning outcomes help to ensure that the objectives of the relevant curriculum component, the learning and teaching strategies adopted and the assessment approaches employed are consistent with each other and integrate the key skills effectively. The learning outcomes in each syllabus integrate the five key skills. The increased emphasis on the development of these skills should result in the learner having a central role in structured, well-managed, independent and reflective learning practices, thus creating an environment where learners become more involved in the management of their own learning over time.

The vision for assessment in senior cycle is that, in whichever context it is used, assessment can and should be supportive of learning. A concern for equity and fairness is central to this. Most importantly, the vision reflects the conviction that equity and fairness in assessment are promoted by clear alignment between curricular aims and assessment approaches. Formal assessment, as used to test and certify achievement, will continue to be conducted by the SEC. Yet here some significant changes are envisaged, the intention being to ensure that the examinations learners take are most closely aligned with the aims of the syllabus they have studied. Formative assessment (including assessment for learning) is a continuous part of the teaching and learning process, involving learners, wherever possible, as well as teachers, in identifying next steps. In the context of providing support for learning, the most valuable assessment takes place at the site of learning where learners receive support and guidance in their learning. As senior cycle education comes to include a greater range of curriculum components in more flexible combinations, senior cycle certification could be broadened to provide every learner with a record of achievement in all the curriculum components taken as part of their senior cycle. The record of achievement may take the form of a portfolio that would include grades achieved in all Leaving Certificate curriculum components. But it might also include a record of the transition units completed and any certificates gained from awarding bodies other than the SEC, whose qualifications the learner had gained during the course of senior cycle. (*Ibid.*).

Pre-primary education

Provision in primary schools for children aged 4 and 5 (i.e. infant classes) is an integral part of the regular school system and therefore the role of primary schools is significant for the age group that other countries might call preschool. Preschool education is provided in the main by privately funded childcare facilities. The Universal Preschool Provision, an initiative introduced in January 2010 and funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, provides for free preschool (three hours a day for 38 weeks or two hours and 15 minutes a day for 50 weeks) for children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months in September of the relevant year. The universal preschool year is delivered in a variety of childcare and early education settings. Most of preschool playgroups are privately owned registered with the Irish Playgroups Association. The health authorities also give grants to voluntary bodies, to provide pre-schooling for children with disabilities and for disadvantaged groups. These are mainly in nurseries and in community playgroups

run by voluntary agencies. The early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector is regulated under The Child Care (Preschool Services) (No 2) Regulations of 2006. These Regulations outline the requirements for services to provide a quality environment and include health and safety issues, staff-child ratios, space afforded per child, ventilation, lighting and insurance requirements.

The White Paper on Early Education *Ready to Learn* (1999) set out a comprehensive strategy for the development of early childhood education for children aged up to 6. Particular emphasis has been placed on catering for disadvantaged children and children with special needs. Since 2000, significant progress has been made towards the establishment of high quality (ECCE) provision. The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, which was developed and published in 2006, is a quality assurance process which addresses all aspects of practice in ECCE services. It is designed to support practitioners to develop high quality services for children aged birth to 6 years and is relevant to all settings where children spend time out of their home environment. It was developed in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders and its application within the childcare and early education sectors is currently on a voluntary basis. *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, which has been developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and launched in 2009, supports practitioners in planning for and providing enriching, challenging and enjoyable learning opportunities for children from birth to age 6. It can be used in different types of settings including children's homes, child minding settings, full- and part-time daycare, sessional services and infant classrooms.

Children under 6 years of age enrolled in primary schools must follow the Primary School Curriculum of 1999 for infant classes. While there is no specific timetable set down in this curriculum, there are certain core curricular activities that are expected to take place on a daily basis. There are six main areas in the primary curriculum (i.e. language; mathematics; social, environmental and scientific education; arts education; physical education; and social, personal and health education). A flexible approach consisting of blocks of time rather then clearly defined half-hour periods is advised. This is especially evident at infant level, where a holistic and integrated approach to learning is necessary. Children in the infant classes normally finish one hour earlier than the general school population. Secular instruction of not less than three hours daily is provided, as well as thirty minutes religious instruction and a period of time for recreation. The Primary School Curriculum of 1999 presents initial advice for teachers on assessing children's learning in the primary school. It notes that assessment in the primary school should concern both the process and product of learning and should provide information on the child's cognitive, creative, affective, physical and social development. The curriculum describes assessment as having four functions—formative, summative, evaluative and diagnostic. It outlines the purposes of assessment for each curriculum area and it recommends a variety of assessment methods that teachers can use in each curriculum subject. For children with special educational needs, the Department of Education and Skills supports the provision of education in integrated and inclusive environments, as opposed to specialized settings, unless it is not in the best interests of the child. (Eurydice, 2009/10).

Aistear is the outcome of many years of research, consultation, planning, and development by the NCCA in partnership with the early childhood sector in Ireland and abroad. The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework describes the types of learning (dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding) that are important for children in their early years, and offers ideas and suggestions as to how this learning might be nurtured. The Framework also provides guidelines on supporting children's learning through partnerships with parents, interactions, play, and assessment. In supporting children's early learning and development, *Aistear*: identifies what and how children should learn, and describes the types of experiences that can support this; makes connections in children's learning throughout the early childhood years and as they move from one setting to another; supports parents as their children's primary educators during early childhood, and promotes effective partnerships between parents and practitioners; complements and extends existing curriculums and materials; and informs practice across a range of settings, disciplines and professions, and encourages interdisciplinary work. (NCCA, 2009).

The Framework is based on 12 principles of early learning and development. These are presented in three groups. The first group concerns children and their lives in early childhood (the child's uniqueness; equality and diversity; children as citizens). The second group concerns children's connections with others (relationships; parents, family and community; the adult's role). The third group concerns how children learn and develop (holistic learning and development; active learning; play and hands-on experiences; relevant and meaningful experiences; communication and language; the learning environment).Each principle is presented using a short statement. This is followed by an explanation of the principle from the child's perspective. This explanation highlights the adult's role in supporting children's early learning and development. *Aistear* presents children's learning and development using four themes. These are: well-being (which is about children being confident, happy and healthy); identity and belonging (which is about children developing a positive sense of who they are, and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community); communicating (which is about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes); and exploring and thinking (which is about children making sense of the things, places and people in their world by interacting with others, playing, investigating, questioning, and forming, testing and refining ideas).

The themes describe what children learn—the dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding. Each theme begins with a short overview of its importance for children as young learners. The theme is then presented using four aims. Each aim is divided into six learning goals. Some of these goals may be more suited to children as they get older. Each theme offers some ideas and suggestions for the types of learning experiences that adults might provide for children in working towards *Aistear*'s aims and goals. These ideas and suggestions are known as sample learning opportunities. They are presented in three overlapping age groups: babies (birth to 18 months); toddlers (12 months to 3 years); and young children (2½ to 6 years). While most of the sample learning opportunities can be adapted and developed for different types of settings, some may be more suited to one type than to another. Most of the sample learning opportunities can also be adapted for use indoors or outdoors. Using the outdoor environment can often give children

more space and freedom to move, to explore, and to express themselves, which in turn can bring even greater enjoyment, satisfaction and learning. (*Ibid.*).

The Quarterly National Household Survey module on childcare which took place in the last quarter of 2007 showed that parents or guardians of preschool children are still the main carers during the normal working day. At preschool stage, 42% of children used at least some non-parental childcare during the working day. The most prevalent form of non-parental childcare for pre-school children was crèche/Montessori/playgroup (19%), followed by child minder/au pair/nanny (12%). Almost one tenth of families used unpaid relatives with the remaining families using unpaid relatives or another type of childcare. Fees are paid by parents/guardians as set down by the service provider and vary according to the nature and location of the service. The Community Childcare Subvention Scheme, which was introduced under the National Childcare Investment Programme in January 2008, subvents community-based not for profit childcare facilities to enable them to provide quality childcare services at reduced rates to disadvantaged and low-income parents. Most preschools are provided either through community based/not for profit childcare groups or by private providers and are therefore free to organize their groups of children, as need demands. Preschools are obliged to register with their local Health Board and must comply with the Department of Health Regulations in relation to health and safety. (Eurydice, 2009/10).

The Central Statistics Office reports that in 2009/10 a total of 129,569 children were enrolled in infant classes in primary schools. (CSO, 2011).

Primary education

As mentioned, children may be enrolled in primary education on their fourth birthday and the typical primary school divides pupils by age into eight year-groups or standards ranging from junior and senior infants (4- and 5-year-olds) to sixth class or standard. The normal age for completing primary education is 12 years. Primary schools are required by the Department of Education and Science Circular No. 138/2006 to assess achievement in English reading and mathematics at the end of first class (i.e. grade 1) or the beginning of second class, and at the end of fourth class or the beginning of fifth class using standardized tests. Within the framework of the National Strategy 2011-2020 *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*, with effect from 2012 onwards all primary schools and all Irish-medium primary schools are required to administer standardized tests of English reading, mathematics and Irish reading (in the case of Irish-medium schools) to all eligible pupils at the end of second, fourth and sixth class.

According to the Primary School Curriculum 1999, the three general aims of primary education are to: enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realize his or her potential as a unique individual; enable the child to develop as a social being through living and cooperating with others and so contribute to the good of society; and prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning. The achievement of these aims entails the acquisition of a wide range of knowledge and the development of a variety of concepts, skills and attitudes appropriate to children of different ages and stages of development in the primary school. The specific curriculum aims are to enable the children to: come to an understanding of the world through the acquisition

of knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes and the ability to think critically; apply what they learn to new contexts in order to respond creatively to the variety of challenges they encounter in life; become lifelong learners through developing positive attitudes to learning and the ability to learn independently; develop spiritual, moral and religious values; develop literacy skills, comprehension skills and expressive skills in language and to appreciate the power and beauty of language; develop numeracy and problem-solving skills and an understanding of mathematical concepts; develop a respect for cultural difference, an appreciation of civic responsibility, and an understanding of the social dimension of life, past and present; and develop skills and understanding in order to study their world and its inhabitants and appreciate the interrelationships between them.

With regard to the general objectives, in engaging with the curriculum the child should be enabled to:

- communicate clearly and confidently using a range of linguistic, symbolic, representational and physical expression;
- explore and develop ideas through language;
- develop an appropriate range of comprehension strategies and problem-solving skills;
- understand and apply the vocabulary and phraseology particular to the different subjects in the curriculum;
- locate, extract, record and interpret information from various sources;
- use information and communication technologies to enhance learning;
- listen attentively and with understanding;
- read fluently and with understanding;
- develop a love of and an interest in reading;
- write fluently and legibly and acquire an appropriate standard of spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation;
- develop a competence in a second, and perhaps a third, language at a level appropriate to his or her ability and cultural and linguistic background;
- understand computational skills and apply them with accuracy and speed;
- understand and apply mathematical concepts;
- extend his or her knowledge and understanding of, and develop a range of skills and interest in, the cultural, historical, geographical and scientific dimensions of the world;
- develop and apply basic scientific and technological skills and knowledge;
- extend his or her knowledge and understanding of, and develop curiosity about, the characteristics of living and non-living things, objects, processes, and events;
- develop an appreciation and enjoyment of aesthetic activities, including music, visual arts, dance, drama and language;
- develop the skills and knowledge necessary to express himself or herself through various aesthetic activities, including music, visual arts, dance, drama and language;
- acquire a knowledge and understanding of the body and movement, and develop agility and physical coordination;
- develop a positive awareness of self, a sensitivity towards other people, and a respect for the rights, views and feelings of others;

- develop a foundation for healthy living and a sense of responsibility for his or her own health;
- develop self-discipline, a sense of personal and social responsibility, and an awareness of socially and morally acceptable behaviour;
- acquire sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of life;
- develop the capacity to make ethical judgments informed by the tradition and ethos of the school;
- develop a knowledge and understanding of his or her own religious traditions and beliefs, with respect for the religious traditions and beliefs of others.

The specific aims and the general objectives are intended for all primary schools. However, in pursuing them, certain factors need to be considered: the child's stage of development; differences between children owing to variations in personality and intellectual and physical ability; the particular circumstances of the school. Although individual aims and objectives may appear to focus mainly on one aspect of the child's development, it is recognized that all areas of child development are inextricably linked. (DES & NCCA, 1999).

As mentioned, the 1999 primary school curriculum is organized into the following learning areas, some of which are further subdivided into subjects: language (Irish and English); mathematics; social, environmental and scientific education (SESE, including history, geography and science); arts education (music, visual arts, drama); physical education; and social, personal and health education (SPHE, including relationships and sexuality education). The development of curriculum for religious education remains the responsibility of the different church authorities. New emphases within the curriculum include a focus on pupils' learning styles, the integration of assessment into all areas of teaching and learning and the role of ICT. The phased implementation of the revised curriculum has been supported by an extensive programme of in-service training for all primary teachers.

The Primary School Curriculum 1999 recommends the following minimum weekly time framework:

Ireland. Primary education: suggested minimum weekly time framework

Curriculum area	Number of weekly hours in each grade (min.)	
	Short day **(infants classes, age 4–6)**	**Full day** **(grades 1–6)**
Language:		
– First language (Irish/English)	3h	4h
– Second language (English/Irish)	2h30m	3h30
Mathematics	2h15m	3h
Social, environmental and scientific education (includes history, geography and science)	2h15	3h
Social, personal and health education	30m	30m
Physical education	1h	1h
Arts education (includes visual arts, music and drama)	2h30m	3h
Discretionary curriculum time	1h	2h
Total secular instruction	**15h**	**20h**
Religious education (typically)	2h30m	2h30m
Assembly time	1h40m	1h40m
Roll call	50m	50m
Breaks	50m	50m
Recreation (typically)	2h30m	2h30m
Total	**23h20m**	**28h20m**

Source: DES & NCCA, 1999. 'In accordance with the Rules for National Schools and relevant circulars, the suggested time framework is based on the minimum of four hours of secular instruction, with the modification of this to take account of the shorter day in infant classes. [...] The period of discretionary curriculum time can be allocated, at the teacher's and at the school discretion, to any of the six curriculum areas or to any of the subjects within them. This framework also allows for the inclusion of a modern language in the curriculum where this is available. The element of discretionary curriculum time can be used for different purposes and in different ways. It could be used, for example, to provide extra time for the completion of an aspect of learning in one subject, to respond to children's needs in particular areas of learning, or to afford flexibility when dealing with a specific project or theme. […] Because the period of secular instruction for children in infant classes may be shorter than that provided for older children, the suggested time framework is not directly applicable, as it is for other class groups. The child at infant level perceives and experiences learning in an integrated way. This requires particular approaches to teaching and learning and will entail a more flexible use of the suggested time frame. However, the particular balance of time that it strives for will still provide a useful guide in planning the learning experiences that are most appropriate to the developmental needs of children of this age.' (p. 67–69).

The primary education sector comprises national schools, special schools and non-aided private primary schools. The vast majority of the primary schools are state-aided parish schools, having been established under diocesan patronage. The state gives explicit recognition to their denominational character. The privately-owned primary schools are not part of this system, but they offer broadly a similar type of education as primary schools. In recent years, a small number of multi-denominational schools have been established in response to local parental demand, and these receive state support on the same terms as denominational schools. Attendance and other welfare issues are now monitored and enforced by the National Educational Welfare Board. In 2008/09 approximately 65% of classes in primary

schools were single grade classes. Some 24% of all classes were consecutive grade classes while the remaining 11% were multigrade classes. This grouping is explained by the fact that almost 47% of the primary schools have less than 100 pupils and therefore have three or fewer teachers. Schools usually start and finish a little earlier in urban areas (8:50-14:30) in comparison to country schools (9:30-15:00). Children in the infant classes normally finish one hour earlier than the general school population (13:30-14:00). (Eurydice, 2009/10). The minimum annual lesson time at primary level is 915 hours. There is no fixed number of lessons which must be taught. Lessons generally last 30 minutes and schools follow general guidelines in regard to the amount of time per week allocated to each aspect of the curriculum. (Eurydice, 2011).

The 1999 curriculum expects that teachers will use a wide range of approaches and methodologies to implement the curriculum. In particular, teachers are expected to achieve a balance between the development of pupils' knowledge, concepts and skills with a particular emphasis on enabling children to learn how to learn. The methods advocated in the primary curriculum include the use of the child's immediate environment as the context for learning, guided activity and discovery methods, collaborative learning approaches and the use of differentiation. Integration is also a key approach in the primary curriculum. All primary school teachers are trained in the use of these methodologies during pre-service and receive ongoing support in their use in the continuing professional development provided by the Primary Professional Development Service. The curriculum particularly encourages collaborative learning through pair and group work across the different subject areas as appropriate to learning contexts and goals.

The 1999 curriculum and guidelines on assessment provided by the NCCA in 2007, position assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning. Teachers are advised to use a variety of assessment methods to support them in assessing pupils' learning and in making decisions about their pupils' future learning. The NCCA guidelines present nine assessment methods as a continuum of approaches ranging from those where the child takes the lead (e.g. pupils' self assessment, conferencing) to those where the teacher has a greater role in leading the assessment activity (e.g. teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests, standardized testing). From 2007, all schools have been expected to administer standardized tests at two points of the primary school cycle (at the end of the third year /beginning of the fourth year and at the end of the sixth year /beginning of the seventh year) and to report the results of those tests to parents. The vast majority of schools hold formal parent-teacher meetings to discuss individual pupils' progress and to share important information. Informal exchanges of information are also facilitated through notes in a pupil's homework journal or through appointments before, during or after the school day. The vast majority of primary schools also provide reports (normally in writing) to parents at least once in the academic year. (Eurydice, 2009/10).

It is the normal procedure that pupils in primary schools advance from one class to another at the end of each school year. There is no formal examination at the end of primary education and no formal certification is provided. However, all primary schools are advised to provide formal written reports on pupils' performance at least once during each academic year. These reports are sent on request to the relevant post-primary school. From 2006, all primary schools have been required to

administer standardized tests in English and mathematics at two points of the primary school cycle. They are also expected to report the results of those tests to parents using one of a number of report card templates that were published by the NCCA in May 2008. (*Ibid.*).

In 2004/05, there were 3,157 national primary schools and 127 special national schools. These schools catered for 449,298 full-time pupils, including 9,357 pupils with special education needs in national (mainstream) schools and 6,621 pupils in special national schools. In the same school year, national schools were staffed by 26,282 full-time teachers, and the pupil-teacher ratio was 1:17.1.

The DES reports that in 2010/11 there were 3,305 state-aided schools (including 140 special schools) and the total enrolment was of 509,652 pupils, including 7,178 pupils in special schools and 9,732 pupils with special needs in mainstream schools. The number of teaching staff (in full-time equivalent posts allocated) was 32,489 and the pupil-teacher ratio was 1:15.7. (DES, *Key statistics 2010-2011*, September 2011).

Secondary education

As mentioned, secondary education consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two- or three-year senior cycle. As a rule, children may transfer to post-primary schools when they have completed the full primary school programme, usually at age 12. Upon completion of the compulsory junior cycle students sit the Junior Certificate examination (placed at Level 3 in the National Framework of Qualifications—NFQ) managed and administered by the State Examinations Commission. Most examinable subjects are offered at two levels (ordinary and higher) and two subjects (mathematics and Irish) are offered at three levels, i.e. higher, ordinary and foundation. Within the framework of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2020, (tentatively) by 2014/15 all post-primary schools and all Irish-medium post-primary schools will be required to administer standardized tests of English reading, mathematics and Irish reading (in the case of Irish-medium schools) to all eligible students at the end of second year of the junior cycle.

The general objectives of the Junior Certificate programme include the further development and deepening of skills, knowledge, competencies and understandings acquired at primary level. It is also intended to develop young people socially and personally in terms of their self-esteem, competence and ability to take initiative as well as assisting in their moral and spiritual development. The Junior Certificate programme should prepare students for further study, employment and life beyond education as full and active citizens in the local, national, European and global contexts. The junior cycle curriculum is presented in a framework of eight areas of learning experience: language and literature; mathematical studies; science and technology; social, political and environmental education; arts education; physical education; religious and moral education; guidance counselling and pastoral care. (Eurydice, 2009/10).

The senior cycle caters to students in the 15-18-year-old age group. In the senior cycle there is an optional one-year Transition Year Programme followed by a choice of three two-year Leaving Certificate programmes: the Leaving Certificate

(established), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The focus of the established Leaving Certificate (LC), followed by the majority of students, is primarily academic and its main emphasis is on providing students with the necessary education required for entry into third-level and higher education. The LCA is structured around three elements, i.e. vocational preparation, vocational education and general education; on completion of the programme, participants generally proceed to post-LC vocational education and training courses or directly to the labour market. The LCVP is vocational in nature and its objective is to prepare learners for further and continuing education and for the world of work. The LCVP is based on combinations of LC (established) subjects (two of which must be vocational) and students must take three link modules in enterprise education, preparation for the world of work and work experience. Students normally sit the leaving examination at the age of 17 or 18, after five or six years of post-primary education. The Leaving Certificate is placed across Levels 4 and 5 in the NFQ. An increasing number of courses are available to students on completion of second-level education (age 17+). These courses are organized mainly in vocational schools and offer a wide variety from repeat LC courses, vocational preparation courses and pre-third level courses. Post-LC courses are of either one or two years' duration.

The senior cycle contains a range of disparate programmes with distinct aims and objectives. The Transition Year (TY) programme is intended to provide participants with an opportunity to develop maturity in terms of their personal and social awareness and competence as well as continuing to develop their academic, technical and general educational skills. The mission of the TY programme 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. The established Leaving Certificate (LC) programme aims to prepare students to be active citizens in society, prepare them to progress on to further education, training or employment and enable them to achieve their full personal, social, intellectual and vocational potential. The LC examination is used as an entry qualification by third-level institutions and as a selection test for entry into various types of employment. The use of the LC examination for selection purposes has a significant impact on the work of post-primary schools, affecting curriculum content, methods of teaching, assessment and organization of learners. The LCVP was first introduced in 1989 and originally concentrated on particular groups of existing LC subjects. It was re-structured in 1993-1994 in order to make it less restrictive and less gender-biased. It was further revised in 2000-2002 as part of a general review of senior cycle provision. The number of link modules to be taken was reduced from three to two and assessment procedures were revised accordingly. The revised programme offers participants a wider range of options and aims to offer participants an opportunity to engage in an enhanced way with vocational subjects, as well as providing cross-curricular links, a wide variety of learning experiences and links between learning inside and outside school. It aims to develop students' skills in terms of their vocational, technological and interpersonal capabilities and to foster in them a sense of enterprise and initiative. The LCVP also qualifies students for entry to third-level institutions, and for entry to various types of employment. The LCA is primarily intended to meet the needs of students who are not catered for by the two other LC programmes, and who might otherwise leave full-time education. As such, it is regarded as having a key part to play in the retention of the maximum number of

students within the post-primary system until 18 years of age. The LCA programme stresses curriculum integration and active learning. (Eurydice, 2009/10).

There are four types of post-primary school: voluntary secondary, vocational, comprehensive, and community. These offer a broadly similar, comprehensive programme during the three-year junior cycle leading to a common state examination, the Junior Certificate. The introduction of the Junior Certificate Examination and the three-year curriculum leading to it, has contributed to bringing the four types of post-primary schools towards a fairly similar pattern of curricular provision. All four types of post-primary schools also offer a broadly similar programme leading to the LC examination. The largest sector of post-primary schools, i.e. voluntary secondary schools, was generally founded by religious orders and other religious organizations to serve areas of population density. Some school amalgamations have taken place. Community schools are most often established where voluntary secondary and vocational schools amalgamate. In some cases, two (or more) voluntary secondary schools (generally single-sex schools) amalgamate to form a larger, co-educational voluntary secondary school. Education is provided free of charge in approximately 92% of post-primary schools which receive considerable financial assistance through grants in respect of each eligible pupil and the payment of teachers' salaries and allowances. Approximately 8% of post-primary schools, which do not participate in the scheme of free education established in 1967, charge tuition fees. In 2008/09, there was a total of 732 post-primary schools in receipt of financial aid from the then Department of Education and Science. These included 388 secondary schools, 253 vocational schools and community colleges, 77 community schools, and 14 comprehensive schools.

Secondary, community and comprehensive schools are obliged to operate for 28 hours per week where they offer a five-day week. Most commence teaching at 9:00 a.m. and conclude at 16:00 p.m., although voluntary secondary schools may hold classes between 8:00 and 18:00. A small number of voluntary secondary schools, including boarding schools, operate a six-day week holding classes on Saturday morning also. Some schools (mainly single-sex boys' schools and co-educational schools) do not schedule classes for Wednesday afternoons in order to facilitate sporting events such as matches. Vocational schools and community colleges generally operate a similar weekly and daily timetable to their secondary, community and comprehensive school counterparts. The school is deemed to be in operation if it is open for a minimum of three hours a day. Class periods of instruction may vary between 25 minutes and one hour's duration, although individual lessons are most often between 35 and 40 minutes in length. The duration of class periods is at the discretion of the school management. The DES has prescribed minimum numbers of hours for certain subjects in order to facilitate practical or experimental components. (*Ibid.*).

For the three years of junior cycle, pupils take a number of core subjects (Irish, English, mathematics, history, geography, and civic, social and political education—CSPE) and at least two other subjects from a list that includes languages, science, home economics, business studies, music, art, craft and design. The curricula offered in the vocational, comprehensive and community schools in practice approximate closely with those in the voluntary secondary schools. Comprehensive and community schools are required to provide comprehensive curriculums combining academic and

practical subjects. Vocational schools, have, by tradition, emphasized the practical subjects but currently provide a comprehensive curriculum. The number of hours to be devoted to individual subjects is not prescribed at national level. Guidelines are offered but individual schools make decisions on timetabling and allocation of hours for different subjects. As a rule, pupils in junior cycle study eight subjects for the Junior Certificate examination. In a small number of cases, students may take up to nine or ten subjects. Some of these subjects are offered at two levels (higher and ordinary), and in the case of Irish, English and mathematics, at three levels (higher, ordinary and foundation). Only one subject (CSPE) is offered at common level for all. In addition, the majority of schools also offer subjects including physical education and religious education which are not examined albeit a religious studies curriculum was devised and examined for the first time in 2004. The languages available to junior cycle pupils, in addition to Irish and English, are French, German, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew studies. French continues to be the most popular language, taken in 2009 by 60% of the pupils followed by 17% taking German, 9% taking Spanish and 0.8% Italian.

Senior cycle students in years 5 and 6 (age 16 to 18) preparing for the Leaving Certificate examinations must take a minimum of five subjects from a wider list than that offered to those in the junior cycle. The only compulsory subject from this list is Irish. The subject list is divided into five groups: language, science, business studies, applied science, and social studies. The DES Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools recommends that candidates study at least three subjects from the group most suited to their individual abilities and at least two subjects from outside the chosen group. However, in reality, this is often not the case. The subject groups (which are not always mutually exclusive) contain the following combinations according to the Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools:

- Languages: Irish, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Latin, Ancient Greek, Hebrew Studies, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, Classical Studies (13 subjects). Other European Union and other languages are also examined as non-syllabus subjects, principally as 'mother-tongue' languages.
- Sciences: mathematics, physics, chemistry, physics and chemistry, biology, applied mathematics, agricultural science (7 subjects).
- Business studies: accounting, business studies, economics (3 subjects).
- Applied Science: engineering, design and communication graphics, construction studies, physics and chemistry, agricultural science, home economics (scientific and social), agricultural economics, technology (8 subjects).
- Social studies: history, geography, art (including crafts), music, home economics (scientific and social), religious studies (6 subjects).

In 2008/09, a majority of school candidates were studying three LC subjects from the language group. Irish (the only compulsory subject) was selected by 83.5% of the total cohort and English by 93.3% of all senior cycle students. Just over half (50.6%) of all those in senior cycle were also studying French. A little over two-fifths of all LC candidates were taking two subjects from the science group – 94.9% of the entire cohort had selected mathematics and 51.4% were studying biology. Individual subjects from other groups had a high uptake – 45.8% of the total cohort was studying

geography for example, 23.7% were taking home economics (social and scientific) and 33.7% had opted for business studies. Other subjects in those groups had a substantially lower uptake, however. (*Ibid.*).

Ongoing student assessment in post-primary schools is the subject teacher's responsibility. All schools organize tests usually, pre-Christmas and pre-Easter, and towards the end of the school year. These school-based examinations are generally formal in nature and are set by the subject teachers. Reports giving grades or marks attained and some comment on progress are normally sent to parents. It is the stated policy of the DES that all pupils should progress from their current class level to a higher one at the end of each school year. In certain circumstances, exemptions are sanctioned by the DES at the request of school management and students are allowed to repeat a year.

In 2009, a total of 55,557 students sat for the Junior Certificate examination (49% of whom were female and 51% of whom were male). This included re-entrants to education (2.3%) that entered for the examination through education schemes such as the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and the Back to Education Initiative. The majority of all candidates sat at least five subjects and most of these received a minimum of a D grade in five subjects. In 2009, a total of 57,455 candidates sat the LC examinations (including the established LC, the LCA and the LCVP). Most of those were school-based candidates (92.4%). A small proportion of the total was repeating the examination (3.8%). Non school-based students included candidates on the VTOS and external candidates (3.8%). Out of the total number of candidates, 5.7% were taking the LCA examination. The proportion of those sitting the LCA has risen substantially over the years when it was first introduced—from somewhat under 3% to a total of over 5%. (*Ibid.*).

As well as the courses provided in third-level institutions, a wide range of vocational education and training courses are offered at the post-secondary level. Post-Leaving Certificate courses are full-time one- and two-year programmes of integrated education, training and work experience provided in schools and colleges outside the third level sector to prepare participants for employment or further education/training, and develop the skills needed for specific occupations. The new system of apprenticeship training provides alternating on-the-job training in conjunction with off-the-job training in Training Centres and Institutes of Technology. On successful completion of training an apprentice receives the National Craft Certificate awarded by the Further Education and Training Awards Council. Traineeships combine workplace training with formal off-the-job tuition in a Training Centre which is conducted by experienced and professional trainers. Traineeships vary in duration from six to twenty-four months, depending on the scope of the curriculum, the skills requirement of the occupation and the entry level of the trainees.

The DES reports that in 2010/11 there were 729 second-level schools (including 383 secondary schools, 254 vocational schools and 92 community and comprehensive schools) and the total enrolment was of 356,107 students (including post-LC courses), of whom 186,622 in secondary schools, 114,761 in vocational schools, and 54,724 students in community and comprehensive schools. The number of teaching staff (in full-time equivalent posts allocated) was 26,185 and the student-teacher ratio was 1:13.6. (DES, *Key statistics 2010-2011*, September 2011).

Assessing learning achievement nationwide

The 2004 National Assessment of Mathematics Achievement (NAMA 2004), carried out by the Inspectorate with the support of the Educational Research Centre (ERC), has been the fifth in a series of national assessments of mathematics in primary schools, dating back to 1977, and the first since the introduction of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum. The purpose of NAMA 2004 was to describe performance in mathematics at fourth class level in primary schools, identify variables associated with achievement, and compare performance with performance on the 1999 National Assessment of Mathematics Achievement. The main findings included the following: (i) the average scale scores of pupils in 1999 and 2004 were similar; (ii) pupils performed best on the skill 'understanding & recalling' (62%), and least well on 'applying & problem solving' (48%); performance on 'reasoning' items improved significantly between 1999 and 2004; (iii) almost 12% of pupils achieved at an advance level (Level 5) on the overall proficiency scale, while 15% achieved at or below the minimum level (Level 1); (iv) pupils achieved a significantly lower mean score on the calculator section than on any other section, indicating that they found the calculator items to be more challenging.

In 2004 the National Assessment of English reading was administered to a representative sample of pupils in fifth class in that year. It was reported that the average performance of students in 2004 was not significantly different from that of students in a representative sample of fifth class pupils in 1998. (ERC, 2010).

Ireland has participated in the OECD Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) of the performance of 15-year-olds in 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009. The 2009 results show a significant decline in performance in reading literacy and mathematics. Ireland's mean score for science in 2009 was 508.0 ('above average'), which is significantly higher than the OECD average of 500.8. Ireland was ranked 20th in science out of 65 countries that took part in PISA in 2009. The mean scores were in the range 505.4 to 513 over the period 2000-2006, and in 2009 it was 508, the same as in 2006. Ireland achieved a mean score on the combined reading scale of 495.6, which is not significantly different from the OECD mean of 493.4. Irish students' performance in reading places Ireland among the 'average performing' countries in this domain. Ireland's ranking fell from fifth in 2000 (out of 32 countries) to 22nd out of 65 countries in 2009. The fall in reading scores in Ireland was the largest in the OECD. The change shows a significant increase in the proportion of pupils scoring at less than level 2 (although it is slightly better than the OECD average at this level), as well as a decline in the proportion scoring at the top levels of literacy (also at the OECD average). The mean reading scores for Ireland were in the range 526.7-515.5 over the period 2000 to 2006, but fell to 495.6 in 2009. The performance of students in mathematics places Ireland among the 'below average' performing countries in this domain for the first time. In mathematics Ireland achieved a mean score 487.1 which is significantly below the OECD average of 495.7, albeit by just 8.6 score points. Ireland's ranking fell from 22nd out of to 57 countries in PISA 2006 to 32nd out of 65 countries in 2009. The fall in mathematics scores was the second largest in the OECD. The proportion scoring at less than level 2 (20.9%) is slightly better than the OECD average (22.0%), but the proportion at Levels 5 and 6 in Ireland (6.7%) is significantly less than the OECD average (12.7%). The mean scores for

Ireland were in the range 501-503 over the period 2000 to 2006, but fell to 487.1 in 2009. (DES, March 2011).

Experts in assessment at the ERC and international experts from Statistics Canada argued that a number of possible reasons may explain the weaker performance in PISA 2009 compared to PISA 2000. The proportion of students with an immigrant background participated in PISA testing in Ireland rose from 2.3% in 2000 to 8.3% in 2009; the proportion of students who speak a language other than English/Irish rose from 0.9% in 2000 to 3.5% in 2009. Other demographic changes between 2000 and 2009 include an increase in the proportion of students with special needs taking the PISA tests (which is not possible to quantify precisely) and a decline in the percentage of early school leavers (from 2.1% to 1.5%). A further factor that could have impacted on the way in which schools treated the PISA test administration in 2009 was survey fatigue. Post-primary schools were involved in three international studies in the 2007/08 and 2008/09 school years, which was unprecedented. Another possible reason for the decline in scores is that PISA is based on a test of a random sample of the population. Chance factors in the sample selected are likely to have been responsible for some of difference in the scores, because in 2009, the average score for students in eight of the schools sampled were significantly lower than any school in any of the three previous PISA surveys. Finally, the experts from Statistics Canada and the ERC have pointed to a number of weaknesses in how PISA establishes and reports trends in achievement. They state that these weaknesses are likely to have exaggerated any decline in the scores of students in Ireland. Some caution should be exercised in viewing Ireland's PISA results for 2009, in that there is little corroborating evidence from other sources as yet to support the dramatic decline shown in literacy and mathematics scores. The national assessments in literacy and mathematics at primary level have not shown a diminution in standards over the period since 1999. The PISA results for Ireland for 2000, 2003 and 2006 did not show significant change. An analysis of second level examination results over the last 10 years would also suggest reasonably consistent patterns of performance. (*Ibid.*). Changes made to the assessment framework for reading and the administration of new reading items may have impacted on student performance. The analysis by Statistics Canada supports the assertion that the revision of the framework and consequent introduction of new reading items has resulted in a systematic underestimation of student performance in Ireland, since student performance on individual items was better than predicted on the basis of their scaled reading scores in 65% of cases and this was particularly pronounced in the case of the new, as opposed to the link, items. (ERC, 2010).

In November 2010 were made available the results of national assessments undertaken in 2009 by the ERC in English reading and mathematics of some 8,000 pupils in 2nd and 6th class in primary schools. Previous studies assessed the performance in 1st and 5th classes, so that the results in the 2009 study are not directly comparable. However, they set a baseline for monitoring future progress. The ERC has indicated that they do not provide any corroborative evidence supporting the decline in performance standards which has been suggested by PISA. In reading, pupils did relatively poorly on questions requiring them to interpret and integrate information, especially at 6th class. There were no gender differences at 6th class, but girls outperformed boys on all content strands at second class. In mathematics, performance on 'apply and problem solve' and 'measures' was poor relative to other

areas, especially at 6th class. There were no gender differences on overall results, although boys did better than girls on measures. High school attendance, socio-economic status, enjoyment of reading, and number of books in the home were all factors associated with good performance. Lower SES, being a member of the Traveller Community, a lone parent or in a large family, speaking a language other than English/Irish at home, having a TV in the bedroom or spending excessive time on the internet/gaming were associated with weaker performance. (DES, March 2011). For mathematics, the overall percent correct scores were 57% for 2nd class and 55% for 6th class. For content, percent correct ranged from 49% (measures) to 73% (shape & space) at 2nd class, and from 38% (measures) to 64% (data) at 6th. For process, percent correct ranged from 49% (apply & problem-solve) to 74% (understand & recall) at 2nd class, and from 44% (apply & problem-solve) to 63% (reasoning) at 6th. Thus, items assessing measures and apply & problem-solve proved to be the most difficult at both class levels. There were no gender differences on overall performance, but a significant difference was found in favour of boys on one subscale (measures, 6th class only). For reading, the percent of items answered correctly at 2nd class was 63% (overall, and for vocabulary and comprehension). At 6th class the overall percent correct was 65% (64% correct for vocabulary and 66% for comprehension). At each grade retrieve items proved easiest (65% correct at 2nd, 70% at 6th). At 2nd class, infer items proved most difficult (59% correct), while interpret & integrate proved most difficult at 6th (54% correct). At 2nd class, girls performed significantly better than boys overall, and in each content area. At 6th, the gender difference was not statistically significant for overall reading performance, or for any content area or process skill. (ERC, November 2010).

Ireland participated in the International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS) in 2009 of 14-year-olds across 38 countries. With a mean score of 534, Ireland ranked 7th out of the 36 countries; this score is substantially ahead of the international average of 500. The study ranks achievement across three levels, ranging from understanding of basic civic principles (Level 1) to a more interconnected and abstract understanding of civic principles and processes (Level 3). The results show that Ireland has significantly fewer students scoring below Level 1, as well as significantly more students scoring at the top level of achievement. High scores are strongly related to socioeconomic status and to parental interest in political and social issues. The scores for native Irish students were higher (mean 541) than those for newcomer children who speak Irish or English (mean 529), and significantly higher than the mean score of newcomer children who have neither Irish nor English as their mother tongue (478). In Ireland, 12% were newcomer students, and 7% of these speak a mother tongue other than Irish or English. (DES, March 2011). Females scored significantly higher than males on civic knowledge in all but five countries. On average, females outperformed males by 22 points (about one-fifth of a standard deviation). The gender difference in performance in Ireland was the same as the international average. Despite high average performance, the distribution of achievement (spread of scores) in Ireland is comparatively wide. For example, the Irish standard deviation on the civic knowledge scale is the fourth highest across 36 participating countries. A large proportion of students in Ireland reported spending no time reading for fun (42%) compared with on average internationally (28%). Teachers in Ireland reported markedly lower levels of student participation in community activities, and the mean score on this scale was two-thirds of a standard deviation below the international average. In addition, teachers in Ireland reported higher levels

of social problems at school, with a score on this index about half of a standard deviation above the international average. Achievement differences between schools on the ICCS test of civic knowledge are higher in Ireland relative to the international average. This raises some concerns about the equity of post-primary education system and points to a need to better understand whether, to what extent, and how this relates to practices of grouping and streaming in Ireland. Also, ICCS indicated that over one-quarter of the (second-year) students who participated in Ireland were in classes whose membership was established on the basis of academic ability. This issue should be considered with reference to existing research on grouping and streaming and the negative impact that this can have on achievement and engagement in school more generally, particularly for less socioeconomically advantaged boys, who are more likely to be streamed than other students. Relatively low levels of knowledge about organizational and legal aspects of the European Union among students in Ireland were noted. It was also noted that students in Ireland reported comparatively low familiarity with speaking a European language other than English. (ERC, 2011).

Teaching staff

Initial training of primary education teachers takes place in the colleges of education. There are five colleges of education whose function it is to educate and professionally prepare teachers for work in primary schools. The colleges are denominational in character and are privately owned. They are funded by grants from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) or the Higher Education Authority. Students benefit from the free fees scheme. The duration of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) concurrent degree programme for primary teachers is three years, and students in the colleges associated with Dublin City University and the University of Limerick may be awarded an honours degree at the end of this time. Students in the colleges associated with Trinity College Dublin may only obtain an honours degree if they complete a fourth year. In this case, those who wish to obtain the honours degree usually complete the fourth year on a part-time basis when they are already in teaching posts.

The study of education holds a prominent place in all current college B.Ed. programmes. Generally speaking, the subject is presented under three broad headings: (i) theory, including psychology, philosophy, sociology and history; (ii) methodology, including teaching in the curriculum areas, in order to impart curriculum content and specific subject methodologies and incorporating preparation, presentation, evaluation, class management and resource management; (iii) practical experience: through microteaching and teaching under the supervision and guidance of college staff. Practices vary somewhat between the colleges, but typically a student would spend two periods of two or three weeks' duration in each of the first two years and a further block period of some four weeks in the third year at teaching practice. The students' performance during these periods is carefully monitored and assessed by college staff. This internal assessment is subject to moderation in the last year by the associated University. Generally, students are required to attain an honours rating in teaching practice (A or B on a five-point scale) if they are to receive an honours degree. Applications of ICT have recently become a more prominent feature of courses. In the larger colleges, students also take two academic subjects in first year and one in the subsequent two years. The choice of academic subjects varies between colleges. Among those available in the larger colleges are Irish, English, mathematics, history, geography, music, French and philosophy. Students who are not pursuing

academic courses in Irish and English are generally required to complete professional courses in these subjects. The programme structure which has operated, in the main, since the introduction of the B.Ed. degree in 1974 is likely to be subject to re-structuring and modernization in the light of forthcoming policy changes. (Eurydice, 2009/10).

Second-level teachers are subject specialists trained in a university one-year postgraduate programme leading to the Higher Diploma in Education (HDE), which specializes in educational studies, generally after having completed a BA, BSc or a BComm programme lasting three or four years. The consecutive model is the longest established and the most common form of teacher education for post-primary teachers. As was the case with the B.Ed. degree, 'educational studies' is divided into three components—theoretical inputs from the foundation disciplines, methodology and didactic studies, and practical teaching experience. The foundation studies such as psychology and sociology have a strongly applied emphasis. Methodological components include general methodology and classroom management as well as specific methodologies focused on two curricular subjects. Extensive use is made of microteaching and analysis of video recorded practice. The application of ICT to teaching and learning is also promoted. The concurrent model, which is mainly taken by students with subjects of an applied nature such as home economics, art, materials technology (wood), physical education, operates within a four-year programme framework. The study of the academic subjects proceeds contemporaneously with Education Studies. As is the case with the B.Ed. degree and the HDE, 'educational studies' incorporate the tripartite elements of studies in the foundation areas of education, methodological or professional studies and the supervised practice of teaching. The four-year time frame allows more time for educational studies in the concurrent model, than in the consecutive model. Teaching practice is regarded as of central importance in all forms of post-primary teacher education, and extended periods of school-based experience are incorporated within each course model. The teaching practice generally takes the form of periods of block placement in schools for a number of weeks over the concurrent course duration. For the consecutive courses teaching practice occurs throughout the school year in the mornings of the school week or for two days placement per week throughout the school year. In most instances, designated teachers in school give general guidance to student teachers, while supervisors from the universities visit periodically throughout the year to give guidance and to evaluate performance. Success in teaching practice is essential for graduation and, in most instances; an honours grade in teaching practice is required for an overall honours award in the qualification. (*Ibid.*).

The Plan for Literacy and Numeracy proposes very significant improvements to teacher education. It envisages that initial teacher education programmes for primary teachers move to a four-year degree, with substantial school-based time and an increase in literacy and numeracy modules (and other pedagogical courses) at the expense of humanities subjects which the bulk of student teachers take to degree level. Teacher education programmes for the majority of second-level teachers will move from one- to two-year postgraduate programmes with a greater proportion of teachers studying concurrent degree programmes (i.e. programmes in which students undertake academic subjects and pedagogical studies). The provision of a minimum of 20 hours of in-service training on literacy and numeracy education for primary

teachers and post-primary teachers of English (or Irish in Irish-medium schools) and mathematics every five years is also envisaged. (DES, March 2011).

The board of management of each national school has responsibility for the selection of teachers. This function is exercised through a selection board which comprises the chairperson of the board, the principal teacher and an assessor independent of the board of management, to be appointed by the patron after consultation with the chairperson. As a general rule, primary education teachers are required to spend one year in probation before being accorded full recognition and the payment of their first salary increment. During the probationary year, the teacher is visited on a number of occasions by the inspector, is observed in action, and the work of the class is evaluated and discussed. Post-primary teachers are required to fulfil satisfactorily one year's probationary period following graduation before being fully recognized. Verification of satisfactory probation is usually supplied by the school principal, but the process tends not to be as rigorous as in the case of primary teachers. A teacher who wishes to enter secondary school teaching, and to qualify for the receipt of incremental salary, must satisfy the conditions stipulated for registration by the Teaching Council (previously, by the Registration Council for Secondary Teachers). The Teaching Council was established on a statutory basis in March 2006 (it was launched on a preliminary basis in 2005) and one of its first tasks has been the registration of teachers. The Teaching Council is the professional body for teachers and is responsible for maintaining standards within the profession and for the accreditation of all courses in the state leading to teaching qualifications. Since secondary schools are privately owned and managed, the procedures for the selection of teachers are a matter for the management of each school. However, a fairly common format to govern selection of teachers and contracts for teachers has been agreed between the Joint Managerial Body and the secondary teachers' union, the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland, and this is in line with accepted good practice. Vocational teachers are appointed by a selection board nominated by the Vocational Education Committee (VEC), including a nominee of the DES, and all appointments must be subsequently approved by the Minister. There is a one-year probationary period, but they are often probated without being formally inspected. As vocational teachers are appointed by the VEC to the scheme rather than to an individual school, they may be required to move from one school to another within the local scheme. Appointments to comprehensive and community schools are made by the boards of management on the recommendation of a selection board, and the appointments need to be approved by the Minister. (Eurydice, 2009/10).

Traditionally, Irish teachers have enjoyed high social status and public regard. Competition for entry to the profession is very keen. Teachers are not employed as civil servants, but are regarded as working within the public service. There is a significant difference in the pattern of first appointments between primary and post-primary teachers. A shortage in qualified primary teachers provides a favourable context for newly qualified primary teachers to gain permanent positions, albeit perhaps not always in their geographic location of first choice. On the other hand, similar opportunities for permanent positions are not so readily available to post-primary teachers on qualification. Many post-primary teachers must first spend a number of years on part-time contracts, which however do count for incremental salary scales. Once teachers achieve a permanent contract they have security of tenure, unless they are guilty of serious misconduct, or suffer illness or disability. A

common basic salary scale of twenty-five points (increments) exists for all teachers, and, thus, a linear salary model operates. Annual increments occur for the first fifteen years, then three further increments after three, four and three further years are given. In addition, the school principal, deputy principal, assistant principal and special duties teachers receive extra allowances in relation to the responsibilities they exercise. Some academic qualifications also attract special allowances. Since 1989, a series of national social partnership agreements has been in operation, which determined national salary settlements for society at large. These agreements also included some conditions of service. Teachers unions have been part of these national agreements.

Primary teachers are obliged to be present for teaching for 5 hours and 40 minutes each day and primary schools are required to be open for instruction for 183 days a year. The actual teaching contract hours per annum have been calculated at 915. There is no compulsion for a primary teacher to remain on school premises after the end of the formal school day. In practice, teachers spend varying, but unspecified amounts of extra time, outside the formal school day at work-related activity, depending on their individual responsibility—administration, posts of responsibility, class preparation activity, informal pupil contact (games, clubs) meetings either on or off the school premises. At post-primary level, a teacher's contractual teaching hours are organized over the working week in accordance with the school's timetabling arrangements, and time spent on school premises may vary from day to day. A practice has arisen whereby time spent on school premises may not necessarily be continuous through the day. As with their primary teaching colleagues, many teachers spend longer than contracted hours (usually about 22 hours per week), either on or off the school premises, engaged in various teaching-related, or culture-related tasks, but this time is unregulated. Post-primary schools are required to be open for 179 days per annum. However, as these schools are deemed to be open during the period of the state certificate examinations (12 days), they are in effect open for instruction for 167 days. The DES has calculated that post-primary teachers at both junior cycle and senior cycle teach for about 775 hours per annum. (*Ibid.*).

Up to recently, there was no legislative framework relating to duties of provision, or rights of entitlement to continuing professional development (CPD). The great majority of teachers participate in some form of CPD. To their credit, significant numbers also undertake long-duration certificated courses, on a part-time basis, largely at their own expense. An In-career Development Unit established within the DES in 1994 has been the main coordinating and decision-making body regarding state supported in-service provision. The Unit has been superseded by the Teacher Education Section, established in April 2004 in the Department to determine priorities in the allocation of available State funds for in-service development and the methods of delivery. The Teacher Education Section (TES) coordinates the resourcing of provision for teacher education for primary and post-primary teachers at local and national level and, in doing so, seeks the maximum involvement of teacher and managerial bodies, the NCCA, Education Centres (formerly known as Teachers' Centres) and others. The former Primary Curriculum Support Programme and School Development Planning Support service, now combined into the Primary Professional Development Service, the School Development Planning Initiative and the Second Level Support Service are key to the delivery of in-service and support to teachers in schools as is the Leadership Development for Schools initiative. The National Centre

for Technology in Education works in close liaison with TES, as does the National Centre for Guidance in Education. The universities and colleges of education also provide various shorter, non-certificate courses, and some engage in research and development courses with clusters of schools in their vicinity, with a strong professional development dimension. A range of other agencies offer CPD programmes of various types. There is a great range of curriculum variation in the types of CPD, in line with the needs of a fast-changing education system. School curriculum reform has been, and continues to be a core concern of the professional development activities which are provided. The duration of courses varies a great deal linked to the theme, purpose and outcomes of the provision. Many courses are of relatively short duration. Others are conducted over a longer period, and can sometimes be punctuated over time. Many courses have no formal credits or certification attached to them. Their purpose is to update, re-skill, and re-energize teachers. Increasingly, there is an emphasis on school-based CPD, and the cultivation of a cluster approach between staff in local schools. (*Ibid.*).

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For more detailed and updated information consult EURYDICE, the information network on national education systems and policies in Europe: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/index_en.php

For updated links, consult the Web page of the International Bureau of Education of UNESCO: http://www.ibe.unesco.org/links.htm