

**Submission to NCCA *Innovation and Identity* Junior Cycle consultation
November 2010**

Background

Educate Together is the representative body for multi-denominational primary schools in Ireland. There are currently 58 primary schools in the organisation's network, where around 13,000 pupils learn. Demand for Educate Together primary schools far outstrips supply and the organisation is working to expand the network to meet growing demand. Educate Together is the fastest-growing patron body in Irish education and represents a significant and growing body of parents, teachers and pupils.

In recent years, Educate Together has been under increasing pressure from parents to expand its model to second-level. It is planning to open a new type of second-level school, building on its equality-based, democratic, learner-centred primary school model that it has developed successfully over the past thirty-two years.

Educate Together welcomes the NCCA's process of consultation on Junior Cycle. We believe that change is not just desirable but necessary, even urgent, at this important level of schooling. As part of our project to open our first second-level school, we have ongoing conversations with parents, students, teachers and communities about second-level education; its aims, objectives, nature, the transition from primary to second-level school, etc. This submission aims to share some of the learning from this ongoing project with the broader national conversation about change at Junior Cycle. While we recognise that many of the observations here are already reflected in *Innovation and Identity*, and in the research informing that document, we feel it is worth highlighting the views, experience and plans of our growing body of members.

We refer to three reports in this submission, all of which are available on www.educatetogether.ie ;

- *Feasibility Study for the Opening of a Second-level School by Educate Together*, Seery et al., Trinity College Dublin, 2008
- *Taking the Next Step - a Blueprint for Educate Together Second-level Schools*, 2009
- *Where to Next - the post-primary destinations of Educate Together pupils*, 2010

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This document offers a summary of the key learning from the research informing these reports, and links to how we perceive it relates to the Junior Cycle review process. We have also included some reflections on the themes emerging from our ongoing development work through our second-level working groups.

Key themes

Some parents want change - but better information about “educational success” is needed

Parents are sometimes cited as a barrier to change in second-level education. Anecdotally, schools refer to pressure from parents for a narrow focus on a particular type of examination preparation as an inhibitor to introducing new and different ways of doing things. With increasing marketisation of education, schools might wish to present a traditional “good school” image to attract parents who, allegedly, want examination preparation, teacher-led, content focussed instruction and “discipline” as visible and central. Parental perceptions such as these will have to be challenged if the types of changes that are outlined in *Innovation and Identity* can be realised.

The 2007 Feasibility Study for the opening of a second-level school surveyed parents of children attending Educate Together primary schools. This survey revealed interesting information about what these parents wanted for their children from second-level education. Pressure for a new type of second-level school has emerged in the last ten years from a significant section of parents, whose views should be of interest to this consultation process as they may provide an insight into an “alternative” parent view. The numbers of parents who have children in Educate Together primary schools is approaching 20,000.

Parents were asked to rank different factors in order of importance in choosing a second-level school. “A reputation for looking after pupils social and emotional development” was the highest-ranked factor, narrowly above “high academic standards”. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement “academic results re the best indication of a good (second-level) school”, 35% agreed and 40% disagreed, indicating that while most parents felt academic standards were important, “standards” were not necessarily synonymous with academic results. Thus, while we can be fairly safe in the assumption that most parents want their children to achieve the best qualifications they can, the assumption that parents only want a focus on a narrow range of activities aimed at improving examination results does not hold for this group of parents, especially if such a focus were to limit opportunities to promote social and emotional development.

While the focus of this study was not teaching and learning, some questions touched on this area. This group of parents overwhelmingly stated that they want schools where pupils are treated with respect and courtesy by the teaching staff (98%), where teachers offer positive verbal feedback about academic progress to parents and carers on a regular basis (98%) and where teachers are experienced and well-qualified (97%). They also want a positive and

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supportive relationship between teachers and pupils (93%) and a teaching staff that works in an open and collaborative way with each other (92%).

There is nothing in these responses to indicate that parents would be averse to the types of ideas and innovations outlined in the consultation paper. Indeed, it seems that the type of shifts that are outlined, that is, away from generating an examination grade towards generating (and communicating) evidence of learning, and a shift towards a renewal of teaching and learning would be welcome changes for this group of parents. It is also worth spelling out that since Educate Together parents have actively campaigned for a new type of school, providing schools with the freedom to be different (and supporting them to be different) would also be a welcome change.

It should be noted, however, that in discussions in public meetings, working group meetings and other settings, we have noted a lack of awareness of any educational research and confusion about what constitutes educational success. Myths abound and popular perception is often confused with fact - most worryingly among public representatives and policy-makers, but also among parents. For example, promoting a focus on skills in the curriculum, or on developing collaborative approaches to learning, can be perceived as detracting from the “real” work of preparing for examinations. It can be seen as a zero sum, despite the fact that there is evidence to show that this way of working enhances academic success. In our experience, promoting student-directed learning can be perceived as “bad discipline” and involving students more actively in assessment perceived as “dumbing down”.

While people can often be persuaded of the social and personal benefits of these activities, there is little or no awareness of the *academic* benefits of this method of working. There is a danger that the innovations referred to in the consultation paper will not be fully embraced by parents, policy-makers and even some teachers if evidence about the success of these approaches - academic and social - is not made widely available. It would also be beneficial to identify opportunities to accelerate change in a few schools, and then to highlight these schools as examples of what is not just possible but recommended.

Different types of good school are necessary - but diversity needs to be managed

The OECD, in Education at a Glance 2010, highlights three reasons why education systems should promote diversity of school type and parental choice: entrepreneurial spirit and competition as a stimulus for quality; the matching of families with schools well-suited to their needs, and the resulting reduction in the need for time-consuming compromise and negotiation; and the capacity for innovation which comes with greater school autonomy.

Some may argue that there are already schools of different types on offer in the Irish system, and it is true that schools vary in patronage and management structure. However, for all the choices that appear to be available to parents (single-sex, denominational voluntary secondary school; co-educational community school; VEC-run community college, etc.) in

fact many of these schools offer similar educational programmes, so that even if all school types were available in all areas, the educational *programme* on offer might be very similar.

In a 2008 survey of the post-primary destinations of nearly 1,000 Educate Together pupils there were no significant national patterns in terms of school type chosen (voluntary secondary, community/comprehensive or VEC). Given that these parents have articulated a particular view in terms of the educational model they are seeking for their children at second-level, this suggests that insofar as something approaching this model is available, it is not necessarily identified with any one school type. The existence of different management structures at second-level does not, in itself, result in curriculum diversity.

Educate Together agrees that facilitating parental choice benefits the system as a whole (when well-managed) and we therefore welcome the move outlined in the consultation paper from curriculum conformity to schools having the freedom to be different. There can be different types of good school which suit different communities, young people and teachers and anything which promotes diversity is to be welcomed. However, it would appear to us, as new entrants to second-level education, that schools do have a level of freedom to be different in Junior Cycle as things stand, but that few take that initiative. For example, we are not aware of any rule that indicates that schools must enter students for numerous Junior Certificate examinations, yet most schools do just that. It therefore follows that any freedom that is provided to schools will have to be promoted and supported if there are to be widespread benefits.

Finally, there is a need to manage diversity of school type which is not currently being met in the Irish system. Inequality by school and by post-code is evident over a range of outcomes, with access to third level being the most obvious. The current situation where schools have complete freedom to manage access to their schools, without coordination, has a number of negative effects, both on schools and on the system, and some type of system coordination and support is necessary. This need for system coordination will become more pressing as schools become more visibly different in their curricular approaches.

The limitations imposed by Junior Certificate in its current form

We have already referred to the fact that most schools currently enter large numbers of second-level students for large numbers of Junior Certificate examinations. The *Blueprint for Educate Together Second-level Schools* draws on a range of research which points to the Junior Certificate as a serious barrier to providing learner-centred education in junior cycle. That is not to say that there is anything wrong with the different subject syllabuses or examinations, just that a combination of factors relating to the junior certificate have the effect in practice of stifling creativity, student-directed learning, collaborative learning, community-based and applied learning and the development of key skills.

While it may be possible to work around the edges of the Junior Certificate towards delivering a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum, we believe it would be much easier to work towards the aims and objectives of junior cycle if the Junior Certificate examination was either not there at all, or if it was both reformed and offered as just one of a number of qualification options. While we agree with the principles outlined in the consultation document - that schools need to move away from the Junior Certificate to qualifications designed for all - we believe a radical overhaul of all qualifications offered in schools is necessary. Without this it will be difficult to implement any of the ideas in the consultation document.

Schools will need support and tools

We have referred already to the need for support for schools to implement change. While some schools do currently innovate within the system, if innovation is to become a normal part of the Irish education system, there will need to be a significant change in practices, attitudes and even values of many students, teachers and parents. The argument for support and guidance for teachers is well-made in “Leading and Supporting Change in Schools”. We would also encourage the dissemination of information aimed specifically at parents and students about the types of educational approaches outlined in the consultation document and how they can contribute to academic success. It will be necessary to ensure that all stakeholders are positive about change.

As well as some of the supports that may be considered obvious, such as a detailed framework and guidance notes to work to, and professional development and planning time for teachers and management, a particular tool which we think is worth mentioning is the type of ICT-based curriculum mapping tool which has recently been made available at primary level. Many of the pathways point towards a more integrated approach to delivering the curriculum. An online curriculum mapping tool that facilitates cross-curricular planning and recording would be invaluable to schools engaging in this type of change.

Conclusion

The consultation document *Innovation and Identity* describes the development of a new framework that will provide for “dramatic development in new directions by schools”. It outlines pathways towards change which suggest a renewal of learning and teaching, a broader approach to qualifications and a more flexible and integrated approach to curriculum development and delivery.

Educate Together finds the ideas and examples highlighted in this document appropriate and exciting, and schools who are willing and ready to change will find plenty of food for thought as they contemplate what shape their particular change might take. It is likely that there are many schools who will embrace this opportunity and for them, these documents, as well as the framework to be developed, will be useful.

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We are struck by the “fit” between the ideas outlined here and those outlined in the *Blueprint for Educate Together Second-level schools* - a more integrated and applied approach to curriculum delivery, a greater focus on the quality of learning and teaching, a more flexible approach to qualifications, greater capacity to focus on key skills, and better transition both into and beyond Junior Cycle. We believe the opening of the first Educate Together second-level school would facilitate the implementation of the type of innovation which this consultation paper outlines, in a “clean slate” environment, bypassing the difficulties involved in implementing change in an existing school setting.

To summarise:

- *Innovation and Identity* outlines a vision for change at Junior Cycle which is necessary, possible and exciting. Schools should be immediately enabled and supported to engage with the ideas and to start moving along the pathways identified.
- The move towards school-based curriculum development is particularly encouraging, as it should provide opportunities for schools to better adapt to the needs of their communities, as well as facilitating parental choice in terms of educational approach.
- Considerable supports will need to be made available to schools, including CPD and support for teachers and Boards of Management and curriculum planning and assessment tools.
- There is a need for widespread dissemination of information about the types of approaches outlined as examples in the paper, as well as a national discussion about educational values. Parents, students and policy-makers, as well as teachers, will need to be convinced of the merits of this type of change.
- An immediate and radical overhaul of the State examinations system is necessary if innovation is to be made possible on a wide scale.
- There is evidence of strong support among parents in the Educate Together network for the types of changes outlined.
- The opening of an Educate Together second-level school would provide an excellent platform for implementing and showcasing the type of innovations outlined.

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