

Speech by Ruairí Quinn TD

Minister for Education and Skills

On the launch of his Junior Cycle Framework

4th October 2012

I want to thank the NCCA for the opportunity to come to their conference today to speak about Junior Cycle reform.

Today, I want to congratulate the NCCA on the work they have done on junior cycle reform.

They have been involved in this reform project for many years.

I want to set out my vision for where these reforms are to go, and the journey we are embarking upon to realise those reforms.

The NCCA published *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle-Innovation and Identity* in November of last year.

Towards a Framework highlighted the need for fundamental changes in our approach to curriculum and assessment.

We have to improve the learning experiences of students.

We know that a significant number of first-year students do not make progress, particularly in English and Mathematics.

We must remember that difficult transition that is the bridge from small primary schools to large post-primary schools.

Particularly when you are just turning 13 years of age.

Those who do not have a successful passage into second level education can find themselves in the departure lounge by the end of second year.

A significant number of students in second year become disengaged from the learning process.

In third year, the Junior Certificate examination dominates the experiences of students;

the focus of learning narrows,

the emphasis is on rote learning,

and for many students, the examination does not lead to positive learning experiences and outcomes.

The annual media coverage on the Junior Cert features an inevitable focus on the high achievers.

These are the young people who are bright, talented and able to succeed in education and most likely, in all walks of life.

These are not the young people who are failing the PISA tests which have served as a wake-up call in Irish education in recent years.

What does the media hype say to all the young students who really struggled with the Junior Cert, and did not do well?

The first question that should be asked about any major change to the education system is a simple one:

How will this help the bottom half of students in our schools?

These are the students who lack the confidence and support which a secure home environment provides.

These students need our attention.

These students represent half of our future.

The same young people who will be most at risk of unemployment, lower standards of living and limited career opportunities.

I am very conscious as Minister for Education that we owe *all* of our children a duty of care to enable them to succeed in life and in education.

The NCCA document, *Towards a Framework*, proposed a new approach to the Junior Cycle against this backdrop.

Their approach was developed following an extensive consultation process with parents, students, teachers, school managers and the wider public.

It set out new vision, values and principles for the junior cycle.

I fully endorse those principles.

I welcome the fact that the syllabus design for each subject will set out not only the knowledge to be acquired, but also the skills and attitudes that students will develop.

The syllabus will be accompanied by detailed examples of how students should be able to demonstrate their learning, so that teachers will be supported fully in enabling students to achieve the objectives of the curriculum.

I welcome the aspects of the proposed curriculum that will allow schools the flexibility to design their own junior cycle programme.

This will empower schools to meet the interests and the needs of their students.

This is how we can accommodate difference in our society.

This is how we can begin to address inequality.

I am also happy to accept the recommendations in relation to short courses and Priority Learning Units for students with special education needs.

I am convinced that all the elements of the framework proposed by the NCCA represent a huge development for second level education in this country.

I wish once again to thank the NCCA for this work.

How our students actually learn was the concern at the heart of their vision for reform.

They recognised a need to liberate teaching from the strictures of an examination at lower secondary education that bore all the hallmarks of a high stakes test.

The Junior Cert is no longer a high stakes exam.

That is why it no longer serves the educational needs of every young person.

The NCCA provided a framework which addressed this issue.

It also sought to improve the experiences of our students.

That is why I welcome the NCCA proposals.

They set out a clear direction for us to follow.

But I want to go further.

In recent months, officials from the executive of the NCCA and the State Examinations Commission have worked closely with officials in the Department.

They have developed assessment arrangements that will achieve the changes in student learning which we all want to see.

I am particularly glad to have this opportunity to thank the chairpersons of the NCCA and SEC, Brigid McManus and Dick Langford for the contribution of their senior staff in this process.

I want to acknowledge the work of senior officials in the Department as well.

Today, I publish my considered response to the NCCA document and the Department's blueprint for a new Junior Cycle experience for our young people.

Real change only happens when there is real change in assessment.

That is what the evidence has been telling us.

The influence of assessment on how teachers and students engage with curriculum and learning is well documented not just here in Ireland but across the world.

It tells us something very basic.

The learning experience is narrowed if an assessment system is restricted to measuring students through external examinations and testing.

When the experience is narrowed, both teachers and students focus on learning what is necessary to do well in final examinations.

They simply stop pursuing an educational programme that is designed to meet students' needs.

That is why the best performing educational systems have removed high-stakes external assessment of students in traditional examinations.

That is why they have placed assessment of learning at the lower secondary education level in the hands of schools and teachers and students.

And this is why we need to reform radically the way we assess students' learning at junior cycle.

I want the junior cycle to place the needs of our students at the core of what we do.

I want to improve the quality of their learning experiences and outcomes.

I want to liberate our teachers from narrow exam-based programmes.

I want them to become what they wish to be – **good teachers**.

And I want them to fulfil their potential as leaders of education learning.

Let me talk now to the parents of Ireland.

The new junior cycle provides a framework within which their children can express the fullest range of their abilities and see them developed to the fullest possibilities.

It provides opportunity for growth and for broader experience of education.

It will include all their talents and skills.

And it provides real information for you, on progress and ways of improvement for your children as young students.

Such an approach should enable all students to achieve their full potential.

To be properly challenged in their learning.

Thereby raising educational standards.

Our children deserve nothing less.

To achieve this, we must ensure that assessment becomes a key part of teaching and learning across the three years of junior cycle and provides high quality feedback to students and parents.

The opportunities for such approaches to assessment are no longer stressful where assessment is not high-stakes.

The focus of assessment will now be on supporting learning.

Over the next eight years, I am therefore going to phase out the traditional Junior Certificate examination.

Students rather than subject examinations will be at the centre of the new approach to assessment.

What exactly will this new form of assessment look like?

The Junior Certificate Examination will be replaced with a school-based model of assessment.

This will embed assessment both **for** and **of** learning in the classroom, and it will involve schools and teachers in ongoing assessment of students' progress and achievement.

Clear and unambiguous guidance for teachers on standards will be provided in each syllabus

This will guide the assessment of student progress.

It will enable teachers to chart the next steps for each student's learning

Assessment at the end of the junior cycle will be completed by the school.

Assessment will be based on evidence of learning coming from school work and a final written assessment.

The school-work component will be based on work completed by the student during second and third year and will be marked by the teacher in the school using a marking guide included in the specification for the subject.

Generally it will be worth 40% of the marks awarded to the student.

The kinds of work involved will include assignments, projects, cases studies, performances, oral activities, written pieces and tests of different kinds.

Schools may use developments such as e-portfolios to enhance the changes that this school-work component can provide.

To support this, I have already convened an education and industry group to advise on how ICT can be used to enhance the junior cycle experience at school level.

The final assessment component will be a single written paper or assignment and will represent 60% of the marks.

In the first few years of implementation, the papers will be set by the State Examinations Commission but administered and, for the most part, corrected by teachers as part of their assessment of students.

In the case of English, Irish and Mathematics, the papers will also be corrected by the SEC for an introductory transition period.

Schools will continue to use materials provided by the State Examinations Commission (SEC).

The primary purpose of the certification at the end of junior cycle will be to support learning over the three years.

We simply have to move beyond examinations to a process of generating evidence of learning, and of sharing feedback.

This will help schools, teachers and students to successfully plan their next steps.

In some instances, sharing assessment outcomes with an audience beyond the teacher and the student will bring the best of international practice into Ireland's schools.

The new school certificate will also build on the professional commitment of our high-quality teaching force to work in the best interest of their students.

The work on these reforms begins now.

This is not a cost saving exercise, it is about ensuring that we do better I will secure the resources necessary to bring this vision to fruition.

I will ensure that schools, their principals and teachers will be provided with the necessary professional support to enable them to implement the Framework.

This support will be introduced on a phased basis from 2013/2014 onwards.

The NCCA will begin to develop curriculum, standards and supports immediately.

The State Examinations Commission will begin planning for its phased withdrawal from Junior Cycle examinations.

While today, I lay out the main features of Junior Cycle reform, I welcome input on how we can make it happen from all stakeholders.

A junior cycle consultative group, convened by the Department, will provide a forum where such suggestions can be tabled and discussed.

This forum is where the plan will be refined.

I want now, before I finish, to say a word about our teachers at second level.

This framework is predicated on their strengths.

Their tradition of commitment to their students is second to none.

It is a signal of our confidence in their professionalism and commitment to change.

We continue to attract our best graduates into teaching.

I know that this framework will be embraced by them.

Because it requires, not that they do more, but they do things better.

In a way that enables them to provide a much better Junior Cycle experience and to really enhance learning for our young people.

Thank you