



JMB Opening Statement on the Current use of Reduced Timetables to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills

At first glance, a secondary school timetable appears to represent a straightforward framework to answer the questions ‘who, teaches what, to whom, when, and where?’

But no matter how hard you try, there is usually only a single core timetable each year that can cope with all the prioritised needs of a school. This means that school timetables are like a locked-in jigsaw and schools have limited flexibility to design a bespoke timetable for any particular student who needs, for example, a range of so-called ‘practical’ subjects but some of these happen to run concurrently.

We should at this point distinguish between a reduced *curriculum* and a reduced *timetable* or school day, as these are not always the same thing. A student can be studying a reduced number of subjects but still have other learning opportunities that provide for a full day every day and the new junior cycle framework allows for this.

Schools do not take the decision to reduce a student’s timetable unilaterally or lightly. These decisions are taken in consultation with parents/guardians and the professional services, where they can get them. For every student who has a reduced timetable developed for them, there can be a long backstory of efforts, interventions, creative solution-seeking, professional engagement and encouragement provided by their school.

This approach is almost always a last resort. The consequences of reducing the school day, can be to reduce the breadth of the curriculum and interrupt continuity of tuition in some subjects and so decisions to reduce a timetable are often taken as a trade-off. It can be unrealistic and unfair to force an adolescent into the straitjacket of a full-on timetable and socially intensive school day when she or he is clearly not able for it for a period of time.

A concern, however, arises where a reduced timetable may be put in place *instead* of a more effective strategy. Why would a school contemplate this, even with the agreement of the parents? The answer lies in the failure of the State to provide a wrap-around, professionalised therapeutic, psychiatric and behavioural therapy service to students.

It is virtually impossible to get timely and recurring access to an occupational or speech and language therapist or a specialist in emotional-behavioural support. School principals find themselves landed in the roles of counsellor, psychotherapist, behaviour-management specialist, family mediator and decision-maker well beyond their fields of expertise or qualification.

The promised NCSE framework for supporting students with additional care needs is being trialled but it cannot come soon enough. Meanwhile, many principals have a sense of being

abandoned to care for students in crisis and still ensure that the educational experience and outcomes of the majority in our overcrowded classrooms are protected.

There now exists an opportunity to *properly* resource the NCSE strategy for supporting students which will eliminate in most cases, the need to reduce a student's school day.

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