

Education and Training Boards Ireland

*Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science roundtable discussion on Leaving Certificate Reform.*

September 28th, 2021

Míle bhuíochas to you Mr. Chairperson and to your committee for the opportunity to present to you. My name is Paddy Flood, Director of Schools for Cavan and Monaghan ETB and I represent ETBI here today. There are 250 post-primary schools in the ETB sector of which 48 offer education through the medium of Gaeilge.

Assessment Options

ETBI believes that the case for reform of senior cycle education in Ireland is compelling and that the methods by which we assess our students' learning in this phase of their education is dated. Summative assessments should better reflect the wider, richer variety of methodologies used in the Junior Cycle, in traineeships, in apprenticeships, in further education and higher education. In fact, alternatives to examinations such as project work, oral presentations, performance, design tasks and written texts are already included as assessment methods in our Established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied programmes. However, these assessments are effectively overshadowed by an examinations process condensed into a stressful three weeks at the end of fourteen years of schooling.

We believe that the time is right now to develop a rich, multi-faceted assessment process for senior cycle that is not dependent on performance over a short window in time. Examinations have a role to play but should not dominate. The assessment of learning for senior cycle students should reflect student voice and capture the wide range of their abilities and knowledge and should not be a slave to matriculation for higher education.

Key Subject Areas and Digital Learning

ETBI commends our current senior cycle in providing a broad and balanced range of subjects for students. Our current system is sufficiently agile to incorporate new subjects and areas of learning. The flexibility to provide cross-curricular, skills based and work placed learning that currently exists in the Leaving Cert Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme offers models where traditional subjects do not have to be independent silos in our curriculum. Purposeful use of digital technology has a key role to play in developing safe, independent digitally empowered global citizens. This technology also offers boundless possibilities in enhancing the learning and assessment experiences of students and can in some instances afford them access to a broader curriculum. Access to education for learners with specific difficulties is enriched through use of appropriate assistive technologies as a powerful force for learning, digital technology is equally resource hungry. ETBI acknowledges investment on the part of the Department of Education, yet digital inequity in schools and homes continues.

Access and Equality

Inclusion and equality are highly valued by ETB schools and our sector plays an important role in addressing educational disadvantage. A significant majority of DEIS schools are ETB schools and we commend the DEIS Programme as a vehicle through which future focus on disadvantaged learners can be channelled. School meals, targeted supports, home school liaison and some additional funding provide many students with a platform to participate more fully in education. Research from Trinity College on education during the pandemic highlighted the extent of the wealth and digital divide in Ireland. Students without access to appropriate accommodation, technology and support were most excluded.

ETBI supports the development of special classes in our schools and notes the significant increase in centres for students with autism. Many students in special classes study a customised Level 2 Programme at Junior Cycle, only to find no natural progression route at senior cycle. This should be rectified as a matter of urgency.

Irish Language and Irish Medium Education:

ETBI believes that all students should be encouraged to develop a love of, and some level of proficiency in our national language.

Two thirds of all post-primary schools where Gaeilge is the medium of teaching and learning are in the ETB sector. We are proud to support Gaeilge as a first language in Education and Training Board schools and are concerned about the future of Gaeilge as a subject in these schools. If the current Junior cycle model with a more challenging specification was to be extended to senior cycle, it is inconceivable that one group of students should be expected to perform at a significantly higher level of achievement without recognition for doing so. Bonus points in the CAO for Gaeilge as Teanga 1 would appear to be a feasible way in which this inequity can be addressed.