



Submission to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

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1. Introduction

1.1

The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, ACCS is the management body which advises, supports and represents the Boards of Management and in school management teams of 96 post primary schools across Ireland.

1.2

Community Schools provide a comprehensive system of post-primary education open to all the children of the local community in a multi-denominational setting reflect of the pluralist characteristic of Irish society. An innovative approach to delivery of a wide-ranging curriculum contributes to the spiritual, moral, mental, physical and social well-being of students within their community. Community Schools may also provide for life-long learning within their local community through the provision of adult education programmes. Comprehensive Schools are denominational schools but in a similar fashion promote inclusion of all children of the community in a comprehensive system of education.

2. Executive Summary

2.1

The ACCS was represented on the *Working Group for Contingency Planning for State Examinations 2020* by the General Secretary, John Irwin. The purpose of this group, chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Educational and Skills, is twofold:

1. Identify and advise the Minister and SEC on altered arrangements for the running of the state examinations and the certification of students' learning in 2020 and any consequential actions.
2. Respect the function/role of the Minister and the State Examinations Commission as the relevant decision-making bodies in respect of the state examinations and certification of students' learning.

2.2

The group consisted of representatives of students, parents, teachers, school management, the State Examinations Commission and the Department of Education and Skills. Contributions were also presented by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Higher Education Authority and the National Educational Psychological Service. This consultative process was very much in line with the vision of partnership envisaged in the Education Act 1998. The engagement was very focused, and it was beneficial for all present to listen to and share perspectives on the challenges faced by students completing post primary education in 2020.

2.3

The challenge faced was how best to recognise and certify the completion of post primary education and provide pathways for students to transition to the next phase of their lives be that higher education, further education, apprenticeship or directly to the workforce. The discussions were very focused given the immediacy of the challenge and while views may have differed discussions, while on occasion robust, were always respectful.

2.4

Once the decision was reached that it was not advisable to progress with the traditional Leaving Certificate Examinations this challenge began to focus on developing a credible alternative. The Leaving Certificate, while not perfect, commands a lot of confidence based on its perceived objectivity. The two elements of the Calculated Grades System, combining school estimated marks underpinned by teacher professional judgement and a national standardisation process to ensure equity across schools, is based on sound principles and best practice. The development of the calculated Grades System and associated guidance and support materials in an eight-week period to replace the traditional Leaving Certificate was a significant achievement.

2.5

The reopening of schools is now being considered by a working group established by the Department of Education and Skills. This submission provides preliminary thoughts on these preparations as this is an ongoing process.

3. Leaving Certificate or alternative assessment process

3.1

The preference of students and parents was for a process of predicting student grades while that of the management bodies, teacher unions, Department and Minister was to investigate the potential of running the examinations with as many elements of the Leaving Certificate. A notable feature of the process was the confidence of student representatives in the professionalism of their teachers in estimating marks of students' work.

3.2

A significant part of the process in reaching the eventual decision to replace the Leaving Certificate with an alternative process were papers prepared and presented by the State Examinations Commission, SEC, on the feasibility of running all aspects of assessment of the Leaving Certificate. Two significant papers were considered:

1. SEC Options Paper on Project/Coursework and Practical Examinations.
2. Consideration of a Model for Delivering the Leaving Certificate Examinations Observing Social Distancing and Other Measures intended to reduce risk to public health and safety.

Both papers highlighted the significant challenges in trying to run the Leaving Certificate. Several aspects of assessment had already been compromised and the running of the examinations would be anything but normal for the students of 2020. The lack of access to schools from 13th March would potentially disadvantage disadvantaged students even further. It became apparent the examinations would become a process for some students and not all students.

3.3

On arriving at a decision to replace the Leaving Certificate with an alternative process of assessment considerable inputs from the SEC and the Inspectorate of the Department were considered in detail and worked up to the Calculated Grades Procedure 2020.

4. Calculated Grades

Process around calculated grades

4.1

The two elements of the calculated grades procedure are:

1. The school-based procedure of establishing estimated marks and class rankings
2. A national standardisation process to arrive at a Calculated Grade.

4.2

Central to the school estimated mark is the individual and collective professionalism of teachers. At an individual level, teachers examined a range of sources of evidence, class and term assessments, assignments, project, practical and oral work along with engagement with course material. On a collective basis, teachers engaged with alignment groups where professional conversations and consideration of each other's estimated marks aimed to produce consistent standards across a subject area in schools. The alignment of estimated marks is an essential component of the in-school process.

4.3

The oversight by the school Principal aimed to ensure consistency of application of the procedures and, where necessary, ask alignment groups to reconsider estimated marks. From conversations with school Principals a limited number of reviews took place in most schools, where required, and were engaged in positively by teachers when requested. School Principals have expressed their confidence in the professionalism of teachers and reflected the positivity with which teachers engaged in the process to ensure the estimated mark of students reflected a realistic estimate of students level of achievement if the Leaving Certificate had proceeded as normal.

4.4

The importance, in the first instance, of the professional judgement of the teacher is evident as is the oversight of the process through the alignment groups and the role of the school Principal. The process of creating a school estimated mark as opposed to a teacher estimated mark through professional conversations and oversight of the process should assist in ensuring the quality of the information transferred by the school to the Calculated Grades Office of the Department. Again, the evidence emanating from schools highlights the professionalism with which teachers engaged in this process.

4.5

The research presented by the State Examinations Commission highlighted the importance of the professional judgement of the teacher if this alternative assessment process is to be successful. Teachers have knowledge of their students and access to multiple sources of evidence to support their judgement. This is backed by two key elements of research-based evidence:

- Teachers are good at estimating student performance in assessment tests.
- Teachers are also good at ranking student performance within teaching groups.

This coupled with the professional conversations facilitated through alignment groups refined estimated marks to ensure consistency. The oversight of the Principal in identifying outliers

or any potential error and seek a review by an alignment group provided the last step in maximising the quality of data transferring from the school. It is also significant that in their oversight role the Principal has no power to amend the estimated marks based on the teachers' professional judgement following engagement in the alignment process.

4.6

It will be interesting to see how the standardisation process effects school estimated marks as they arrive at a Calculated Grade. The standardisation process appears based on sound principles:

- National data sets in subject areas
- School based data sets
- Data sets held by the State Examination Commission relating to the 2020 cohort of students in each individual school

The triangulation of these data sets with the school based estimated mark should ensure students receive a fair Calculated Grade. This process should also capture any anomalies where there may have been 'overcompensation' in school estimated marks as feared by some.

4.7

The success of the Calculated Grade process will hinge on the combination of the quality of the data submitted by schools and the standardisation process. There is an expressed fear that students in 'disadvantaged schools', a term I don't like but is the accepted term, may be penalised if previous school data sets are not strong. The Department are acutely aware of this perception through the consultation process and ensure checks and balances will exist in the process to minimise the risk of this happening.

5. Non-school students

5.1

This really breaks down into two distinct groups:

1. External candidates seeking to sit examinations within the school.
2. Students of the school entered for examinations in which they are not following a course of study in the school.

The provision of a separate process for external candidates sitting examinations in schools is essential as the students are not registered in school and will not appear on school data sets.

5.2

Students of the school entered for the examinations but not studying the subject within the school are been addressed through the school. In cases where there is evidence which the school can validate, schools are happy to do so based on an estimated mark submitted on a Form A to the school. The greatest challenge here is the non-curricular languages where often the student does not have a tutor or may have been preparing for the examination with a parent at home. In many cases schools are not able to validate these estimated marks and will indicate such to the Department. This is a significant and very identifiable cohort of students who would normally receive certification through the Leaving Certificate. Some schools have indicated this is an example of the divide in Irish society as a significant proportion of these students are migrants and would not have been able to engage private tutors/teachers.

5.3

The approach advised to schools is to include as opposed to exclude where possible but there must be evidence which the school is happy to validate as a reliable source to support the estimated mark.

6. Impact on CAO system and third-level admissions

6.1

It is welcome that the Higher Education Authority, HEA, has confirmed that Calculated Grades will be accepted as the basis for calculating points used to identify college entry offers in a similar way to the grades received through the normal Leaving Certificate. It is also welcome that the ongoing process of entry to fields of study as opposed to specialist programmes will continue to be explored. At times, the simplistic approach taken by some commentators that all applicants should be allowed entry to whatever college course they sought in 2020 was uninformed and unhelpful.

6.2

For the 70% of post primary students who apply through the CAO and with a similar approach being taken to the issuing of offers through the CAO system, it is hoped this will operate successfully for applicants.

7. In Conclusion

7.1

There are several elements of the Calculated Grades Procedure that must be noted:

- Stakeholder engagement process
- The role of the student voice
- The professionalism of teachers and school leaders

7.2

The engagement of stakeholders in the consultation process was consistent with the partnership envisaged in the Education Act 1998. It was clear from the beginning that the students completing post primary education 2020 were the central focus of the discussions. Without doubt the decision to replace the Leaving Certificate with the Calculated Grades Procedure was correct on three grounds:

- The health and wellbeing of students and the wider community.
- The modes of assessment for the Leaving Certificate had been significantly compromised.
- It was clear on advice at the time it would not be an examination for all students as a significant number would not be able to sit the examination.

For those of us very attached to the Leaving Certificate it was with a heavy heart but nonetheless the correct decision to replace the Leaving Certificate of 2020 with an alternative model of assessment of students' work.

7.3

It was refreshing to have student representatives present at the table. Their contribution was always of interest and measured. It was very much consistent with the Constitutional provision that where possible a person's voice is heard when a decision which will impact on them is being arrived at.

7.4

Throughout the process the professionalism of the teaching profession and school leaders has been exemplary. When needed they were not found wanting initially agreeing on the postponement of examinations to late July, to reopen schools for tuition in early/mid-July and engage in examinations and corrections through August with corrections running into the new academic year. When this was cancelled, they engaged, through their leadership, in discussion to ensure the alternative assessment model was workable, achievable and, most of all, fair to students. In schools they have engaged in the process positively. The leadership in schools has also engaged ensuring the process has operated as efficiently as possible.

7.5

There have been issues along the way that have irked and caused irritation at times. The stakeholder engagement was hugely beneficial ensuring 'buy in' by all participants but of its nature takes time. There was impatience expressed by commentators at times about the process. It was evident from engagement in the process the Department was keen to have details of alternatives available prior to making announcements. In this regard, when the cancellation of the examinations was announced and there was a lag in issuing guidance and training to schools significant frustration was expressed. The perception that the

process was at times media driven was unhelpful. On occasion school leadership felt they were receiving information regarding important decisions through the media as opposed to through official channels.

7.6

Replacing the Leaving Certificate with a credible alternative in such a short period of time is a significant achievement. In this regard the leadership of the Minister and his officials in the Department of Education and Skills and the State Examination Commission deserve great credit. The response from the majority of schools has been positive regarding the system. There were exceptions where the rigour of the oversight process, it being primarily focused on process and procedure, was questioned. It is an interesting procedure and may provide valuable learning for the future.

8. Return to School

8.1

The focus in post primary schools has been on completing the Calculated Grades Procedure and thoughts have not fully engaged in reopening of schools in the next academic term. As a management body ACCS is engaged in the Department of Education and Skills Working Group addressing this particular issue. ACCS fully supports the aim of the group which is to facilitate a safe return to school for all students and staff. The Working Group is also seeking to alleviate the burden on schools by providing materials, support and guidance centrally.

8.2 Challenges for re-opening of schools and procedures that will need to be put in place

The Working Group established by the Department has committed to the following being in place for schools:

- Template documentation required to meet the school's obligations of the return to work protocol.
- Online training for all school staff developed centrally.
- Guidelines and training on cleaning and hygiene procedures required in schools and additional funding to schools to meet these requirements.
- Guidance on the continuity of learning for students including any amendments to curricula.

This collaborative approach will provide consistency of approach across schools and assist school management in meeting their obligations.

8.3 How will schools operate with social distancing

In a word, with great difficulty. In the event the 2m rule remains in place next September it is difficult to see schools open to students. Even with 1m social distancing it will be challenging. Post primary schools by their nature and design are not conducive to social distancing. The suggestion of 'pods' or 'bubbles' does not account for the fact the majority of students are not assigned to a base class but attend in teaching groups designed around student subject choice. This involves significant movement around buildings during the course of the school day by students. The optimum is obviously a need for no social distancing, but this will be determined by the public health experts to ensure safety of staff and students.

8.4 Impact on students and teachers

The impact of lack of social engagement provided through schools on students is well documented and significant. For most students there will be a current educational deficit. While schools have engaged significantly with students since the school closure in March, this cannot replace attendance by students in school. Over the last number of weeks teachers throughout the country have engaged significantly in remote emergency teaching and upskilled in online practices significantly. On return to school most still believe not all students will be able to attend school so a blended learning approach will have to be adopted. ACCS, like others, is developing materials to support schools in this area but significant investment in time will be required to deliver such programmes effectively. There will be students and teachers with underlying conditions who may not be in a position to return to school.

8.5 Impact on parents and children

One of the key aspects is socialisation. There will also be the concern of a growing educational deficit and its potential impact come State Examination/Certification time. Many parents will worry for the wellbeing of their children but also health risks if a full return to school without social distancing if it applies in other settings outside of schools. While not as significant as in primary, the ability of parents to attend work if students are not in school. These issues are significantly enhanced when addressing the needs of students with complex/additional educational needs.

8.6 Impact on special needs education

Very significant. Many students with complex needs cannot engage in a virtual environment. On a return to school there are a significant number for whom social distancing, if in place, would be very challenging. Many students with complex needs require access to school to avail of an appropriate education. Without such access there is a significant risk of educational regression.

8.7 Advantages/disadvantages and challenges of staggered attendance

The main advantage is adherence to social distancing if required. It is essential all students have engagement in face to face tuition. The main challenges will be ensuring consistency and equity of provision for students. A blended learning approach will result in significant time challenges for teachers in preparing and delivering materials in several different scenarios. It is clearly preferable to no access to schools. The proposed idea of some students attending school in the morning and a different cohort in the afternoon is not practical for many schools given transport issues and the cleaning regimes required.

8.8

Thank you for the opportunity to engage in this process. Clearly the work around school reopening is ongoing. From a post primary perspective, the optimum is no requirement for social distancing in an environment where hand and respiratory hygiene are key. We look forward to working with the Department and other stakeholders progressing work in preparing for school reopening.