

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Dé Máirt, 21 Samhain 2017

Tuesday, 21 November 2017

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 4 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 4 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Thomas Byrne,	Maria Byrne,
Kathleen Funchion,	Robbie Gallagher,
Josepha Madigan,	Trevor Ó Clochartaigh,
Catherine Martin,	Lynn Ruane.
Tony McLoughlin,	
Jan O'Sullivan.	

Teachta / Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: I remind members that they must switch off mobile phones when attending meetings as they interfere with the recording equipment in committee rooms. I propose that we go into private session briefly. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 4.05 p.m. and resumed in public session at 4.30 p.m.

Leaving Certificate Curriculum Reform: Discussion

Chairman: I remind members and delegates to turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for the parliamentary reporters in reporting the proceedings of the meeting. Television coverage and web streaming of the meeting can also be adversely affected.

No. 5 on the agenda is engagement with a number of stakeholders on the ongoing reform of the leaving certificate curriculum. There is always much debate and discussion on this topic. In the words of Vere Foster who was a great philanthropist and educator and the first president of the Irish National Teachers Organisation in the late 1800s, “A nation’s greatness depends upon the education of its people.” Obviously, we are talking about the education of the youth, not just towards examination results.

On behalf of the joint committee, I welcome Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan from the National University of Ireland, Maynooth; Mr. John Doran, a guidance counsellor at Patrician secondary school in Newbridge; Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc, director of the Teaching Council, who is accompanied by Ms Carmel Kearns, head of teachers, learning and research; Mr. Tony Donohoe, head of education and social policy at IBEC, who is not a stranger to the committee and whom it is good to see again; Ms Sorchá Ní Chonghaile, Oifigeach na Gaeilge of the Irish Second-Level Students Union; Mr. Geoff Browne, president of the National Parents Council Post-Primary, who is accompanied by Mr. Ross MacMahon, communications director; Mr. Eamonn Moran, principal officer at the Department of Education and Skills, who is accompanied by Ms Ruth Richards from the inspectorate; Mr. Aidan Farrell, CEO of the State Examinations Commission, who is accompanied by Mr. Hugh McManus, assistant head of examinations and assessment; and Mr. John Hammond, CEO of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, who is accompanied by Mr. John Halbert, director of curriculum and assessment.

The format of the meeting is as follows. I will invite all of the delegates to make a brief opening statement of about five minutes’ duration. They can share time, if they so wish. The opening statements will be followed by engagement with members of the committee. Everybody will then have the opportunity to respond to questions or comments from members.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by me as Chair to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it

identifiable. I also advise that any opening statement made to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting, with the submissions received.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I now ask Dr. O’Sullivan to make her oral submission.

Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan: I thank the joint committee for inviting me to give my views on the leaving certificate reform process. Throughout my career in research I have developed an understanding of the challenges students and teachers face within the current system. I have also gathered a wealth of information on how education policy can impact on those who are most marginalised in the community. When I was invited to answer the committee’s questions, I decided to call on my existing relationships with teachers working in a variety of schools. I surveyed 40 teachers using the questions the committee had provided. The views which emerged were similar to my own and formed the basis of my submission. They spoke to two key points, the first of which was the value of the leaving certificate applied programme as it stood. The second theme was that moving towards a skilled based curriculum which focused primarily on employability was important but that it should be approached with caution. I also contacted Dr. Delma Byrne who has worked extensively in researching the leaving certificate curriculum. She added her views on the leaving certificate applied programme which were included in my submission.

In considering the issue of reform I ask committee members to reflect on what they see as the purpose of education. Is it a means through which young people gain the necessary skills and knowledge to perform in a changing economy, or is it the tool we use to develop engaged, enquiring, creative minds empowered to live lives they deem to be valuable? For me, education should focus on the latter and the former will follow automatically. The reason I ask this question is that it speaks directly to the question the committee posed about preparing students for employment and the idea of partnering with business to ensure the skill sets which emerge from the curriculum match those needed in the modern workforce.

I have worked in this area for a number of years researching the impact a 21st century model of teaching and learning has on student skill development. I have published many papers on the subject and my work has shown that, with the correct supports, there is real potential for the leaving certificate curriculum to include a 21st century model of skills which will produce more reflective, collaborative and technologically savvy students. However, it must be approached with caution. When we invite businesses into the classroom, we run the risk of allowing marketisation to direct curriculum content. This has been seen in the United States where large corporations now “sponsor” schools, the students in which are seen as part of a conveyor belt for their industries.

When considering this shift, we must also ensure all teachers and schools will be empowered to implement the same curriculum. My research has shown great variability in the schools that can and cannot adjust to a changing curriculum. It has also shown that schools with more concentrated levels of disadvantage are less likely to adjust their teaching practices to incorporate 21st century teaching and learning models. This is not because teachers do not want to change or that they place less value on change. It is because they lack the resources to make the adjustments. These resources include availability of time, including time to train and time away from discipline issues, in DEIS schools particularly. It also includes access to modern

technology and support to implement these changes in line with the overemphasis on the terminal exams, or what has been called the teaching to the test mentality. This issue is already being reflected in the schools which are taking up the new coding course for leaving certificate. Early numbers reveal that affluent schools are the most likely to run this new option, resulting in a growing digital divide with more affluent students being prepared for the coding world while the students attending DEIS schools or coming from socioeconomic disadvantaged backgrounds are being left behind.

Based on my work in this area I will make the following recommendations to the committee. The curriculum should include courses aimed at addressing the ever-changing skill sets required by businesses, but these courses should be viable for all schools to implement, not just some schools. Extra provisions should be provided for DEIS schools to implement these courses, including the new leaving certificate coding course, and these provisions should relate specifically to adequate continuous professional development, CPD, offerings, availability of technology, and teaching hours. The leaving certificate curriculum should embed these skills within and across the whole curriculum and not limit access to these experiences to the years that are considered less important, for example, for first year and transition year students. This is what is currently happening in schools that want to reform the curriculum.

I move now to the leaving certificate applied, LCA. I have worked with excellent teachers in DEIS schools who see the LCA as an integral part of their school structure and in some ways it is the saving grace for those students at risk of leaving school early. However, the LCA, in its current form, is letting down the students who have been sold on the idea of a vocational journey through school. A recent report from Byrne and McCoy on the outcomes of LCA students and work from the ESRI show consistently that students who take the LCA are having worse outcomes than those who stay on an academic track in school, even a lower academic track. They are less likely to gain employment within a year of finishing school and never progress onto higher education. It has been suggested that only 4.6% of students currently taking the leaving certificate are on an LCA track, but looking at the numbers, 25% of DEIS school students will take LCA, which means 25% of those students in DEIS schools will end up unemployed or unemployable. Social class, gender and household employment consistently influence LCA, with unskilled manual groups being more likely to be on this track. This is also true of males relative to females and those in work-poor relative to work-rich households. The formalisation of LCA in the mid-2000s actually led to an increase in uptake of children from semi-skilled, manual backgrounds, who were previously more likely engage in an academic track-----

Chairman: The witness is over time. I will allow her to summarise the last few points because I know she has recommendations to make. Can we jump straight to those?

Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan: I apologise. My point is that the LCA, in its current offering, is actually very positive. The students really enjoy the social and skills-focused elements of the LCA. Teachers talk about how the programmes are really important for certain students. However, there is no consistency across the offerings and across school types, with affluent schools never offering the LCA. Based on this work I recommend that the content is adjusted to support students to progress onto further education and higher education. I recommend that LCA includes a math and language element so that students can actually access further education, and that higher education and further education programmes are asked to consider LCA in their entry requirements. I recommend a change to the grading structure of LCA, with students’ work being assessed rather than graded by attendance only. I recommend that higher education institutes, HEIs, and further education institutes, FEIs, are encouraged to consider LCA as a

path into their institutions.

In a time where there is a call for a skills-focused curriculum it would seem that the LCA content could be utilised and adapted to inform the current academic track. I recommend that the leaving certificate as it stands explores the models of LCA which are currently working in terms of moving some students into employment and adapt that content to the current curriculum.

Chairman: I thank the witness, and apologise for interrupting. I was conscious that if we start going over time at the start we are going to be here all night.

Our next witness is Mr. John Doran. He is a practising career guidance teacher, but also has written in many publications on the topic of supporting young people and students in the area of positive mental health, particularly around exam time.

Mr. John Doran: I want to preface my remarks by welcoming this opportunity to speak to the committee. Before doing so I consulted with a number of colleagues, including management, principals, deputies principals and colleagues.

“The future is important to me, Sir; it’s where I intend to spend the majority of my time.” That future is not what it was - the world is changing, and it is within that context that I would like to address the issue of ongoing leaving certificate reform.

Let me tell you about Michael, a sixth year student with a sister, Sarah, in sixth class in primary school. Before his 50th birthday he will see Brazil, Russia and China rule the world economically. He has just seen China become the number one English speaking country in the world. The Chinese economy will overtake the United States before he is 40. In the time it has taken me to read this sentence, 66 babies have been born in America, 250 in China and 350 in India. He considers email to be old hat and never uses it. It is old fashioned. It is for old fogees like us, because he runs a social network site with thousands of people participating. He creates his own content on his own YouTube channel. He does not watch TV. He is more likely to be TV.

To reach a million users it took radio 38 years. It took television 13 years. It took the Internet four years. However, Facebook had 100 million users in nine months. That is the accelerated pace of change in Michael’s world. The world’s biggest seller of books does not publish books, the world’s biggest taxi service does not own any taxis, and the world’s biggest distributor of music produces no music. In this rapidly changing world, the only thing we can be certain of is that the pace of change will never be slower than yesterday, and will never be as slow again as it is today. As a consequence, schools cannot begin to hope to keep pace with the rate of change, so we have to move our thinking into an area beyond a definitive set of skills to an ability to learn, to unlearn, to relearn, to problem solve, to adapt to change and to think critically.

Like half the teenage population in America, he can text with his eyes closed. On his 50th birthday he will be given a cheap laptop that will be more powerful than the combined brain-power of the human race. He is going to live on average until he is 95. He is going to be running around a beach well into his 80s powered by body parts imported from abroad. If he leaves school at 18 he will probably have between 70 and 80 jobs. If he goes to university he will probably have between 18 and 20 jobs. He is a minimalist, keeping it light. He needs a mobile phone, a laptop, a change of clothes and a passport, and he is good to go. Unlike his parents he

does not want to own a piece of the world, he just wants to visit it. He will not talk in terms of a job for life, rather a job for the life of the contract. He will most likely take his children to a museum. What will they see? Paper, pens, desks, blackboards, whiteboards, and perhaps the odd stuffed teacher. All the information he will need in his life can be fitted onto a 2 in. square tablet. The pool of employees he is in now is five times greater than it was ten years ago. That is great news for employers, but it is terrible news for Michael. He is a democrat, he is passionate about social justice, and is fully aware that education is the great equaliser, the only weapon he has to make his way in the world.

He has a couple of questions for us in terms of leaving certificate reform. Are we preparing students for a life of tests or for the tests of life? Are we about teaching them or helping them to become independent self-directed learners with an enhanced ability for independent thought, creative capacity, and critical thinking? Are we attempting to shoehorn them into an antiquated educational system or fitting the system to them and their evolving needs? Is the leaving certificate prioritising cognitive ability or multiple intelligences? Are we about valuing their heads or building their resilient heart muscle? Is our attention on content or life skills, and as a consequence are we delivering shallow or profound learning?

The answer to those questions will shape the future of Michael's world and his generation. The stakes are high, but if we get it right, nothing has more scope than education to disrupt poverty and fulfil dreams. That is worth going to the ramparts for, and brings me here today. Indeed, it is with a profound sense of humility that I do so, being one of countless colleagues at the coal face, in the greatest and most important profession in the world - serving young people. I am also acutely aware that there are many more qualified and more knowledgeable people to come before the committee than I, but I do so, in the interests of a profession that I love, a school, the Patrician secondary, that I am proud to represent, and colleagues I have the highest regard for.

The best definition of education I have heard is that it is a conversation between one generation and another about what is really important in life. In my view, there is nothing more important to us as educators or parents than the well-being in the fullest sense of the word, and the educational attainment, of our young people, and their ongoing development as life long learners. Enhancing their capacity to learn, unlearn and relearn should be central to the reform process, mindful that as parents and educators we are custodians of Ireland's most precious resource: our young people.

Our collective endeavour and shared vision is to fashion an educational model at senior level that is fit for purpose for the changing needs of the 21st century. As part of that process we should be scaling up the emotional capacity of young people to cope with tough times and the challenge of change. The celebrated educationalist Michael Fullan is quoted as saying that change is mandatory, but growth is optional. Resilience, stress management and emotional intelligence are vital tools and skills to empower young people to not just survive, but thrive in school and in life and to make the most of the myriad of opportunities that are available to this generation of young people and those who will follow in the years to come.

Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Doran. We do have your full submission. Thank you for the creative and innovative way of presenting. I now call the representatives from the Teaching Council. Will they be splitting time?

Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc: No, I will be taking it.

On behalf of the Teaching Council, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the matter of leaving certificate reform. Before I comment on the questions posed by the committee, I would like to explain briefly what the council is and what we do. The Teaching Council is the statutory professional standards body for teaching in Ireland. We are responsible for promoting and regulating the profession of teaching under the Teaching Council Acts 2001 to 2015. Our functions include: advising the Minister for Education and Skills on entry criteria for programmes of initial teacher education, ITE; reviewing and accrediting, as appropriate, all programmes of ITE in the State; induction and probation of newly qualified teachers; maintaining the largest register of professionals in the State - there are just over 97,000 teachers on the register; vetting of teachers; teachers' learning, or continuous professional development, CPD; investigating complaints against teachers under the council's fitness to teach remit; and commissioning research to inform our work and support a research-informed teaching profession.

In the context of those functions, it is worth noting at the outset of our statement that not all the questions posed in the committee's letter of 8 November are equally pertinent to the council's remit. For that reason, we have decided to respond in broad terms under a number of key headings, which I hope the committee will find helpful. These are: teachers will play a lead role in curricular reform; reforms of teacher education over the past six years overseen by the Teaching Council are enhancing teachers' capacity to engage in, and lead, curricular reform; the ongoing reform of leaving certificate will have implications for teacher education which we in the council and all stakeholders will need to take account of; it will be important to ensure that teachers have sufficient space and time to engage in professional learning that will fully support them in teaching the new curricula and subject specifications that will emerge over time.

I will come to the first heading in terms of teachers playing a lead role in curricular reform. Teaching and learning are complex endeavours which take place in an evolving and dynamic context. Recent decades have seen new understandings and insights emerge in a range of areas, including pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, human learning, early childhood education and teacher education. In parallel, teachers have found themselves facing a range of new challenges and opportunities in the classroom. This complexity is intensified by the fact that teaching takes place in a multiplicity of contexts, thereby resulting in a diverse range of needs. Given these realities, it stands to reason that significant decisions in regard to teaching and learning should be made by teachers, as professionals, who are closest to the site of action and who are committed to the best interests of their pupils and students.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that teachers are proud of the high quality education system which we have in Ireland, as we all are. We will need to be reassured that any changes will maintain and enhance the quality of teaching and learning. In our experience of education reform in the Teaching Council, the challenge is to strike and maintain an appropriate balance between maximising the scope for innovation and professional autonomy on the one hand at the local level, and on the other ensuring that robust and reliable standards continue to underpin the quality of learning experience which all learners experience in our schools and centres of education. Teachers will be as vigilant as anybody else in that endeavour.

The Teaching Council, therefore, believes that teachers, as leaders of learning, will play a lead role in processes of curricular reform, including the reform of the leaving certificate. Simply put, it is teachers who will teach the syllabi or subject specifications that will emerge through reform of the leaving certificate. It will be of the utmost importance that their voices are heard, in all their diversity, in ongoing consultation so as to ensure that the shared vision underpinning reform is fully realised. In terms of the teacher education reforms that we have

overseen over the past six years, they have seen significant change in the quality of education received by teachers in this State. Under the Department of Education and Skills' literacy and numeracy strategy, and the council's criteria and guidelines for programmes of ITE, the qualification required to become a teacher was extended to four years at undergraduate level and two years at postgraduate level.

In line with the accreditation criteria established by the council in 2011, all programmes of initial teacher education have also been reconceptualised to allow for a number of innovations, including extended school placement and an increased emphasis on reflective practice and research and inquiry-based learning. The enhanced programmes which are now in place will support enhanced capacity to develop and adapt curricula and assessment practices in schools. It is noteworthy, for example, that foundation studies are now a mandatory area of all programmes of initial teacher education, and that "through macro curriculum studies, these areas develop students' understanding of, and capacity to critically engage with, curriculum aims, design, policy, reform, pedagogy and assessment."

Chairman: I thank you for that. We have the rest of your statement.

Mr. Tony Donohoe: I wish to thank the committee for the opportunity to address it on what is a critical issue for business. Business and educators have a shared objective of developing young minds with an appetite for learning and the ability to adapt to what can be an unpredictable future. Translating these shared aspirations into something more tangible is the major challenge. Seven years ago, I presented evidence to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills on reform of the junior cycle. At the time, I said:

IBEC believes that radical reform of junior cycle teaching methods and curriculum content could have a profound impact on education outcomes including the development of critical thinking and moving away from the dominance of rote learning. Therefore it should be regarded as a priority area for policy attention and investment.

I am telling the committee this for two reasons. The development of key skills at all levels of the education system has been a priority of business for many years. Moving from a content based to a more skills based learning model at an early stage is more likely to equip students with 21st century skills we have been hearing about. I am also highlighting this because it also provides a useful example of how long it takes to implement reform. The much diluted reforms of the new junior cycle programme will not be finished until autumn 2021, which is a quarter of a century after the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment started its review of the curriculum and assessment methods. While we welcome the commitments in the action plan for education to review senior cycle programmes, we cannot afford to wait until halfway through this century to see the outcomes of this review implemented.

I make this point while acknowledging that education reform necessarily is incremental and necessarily proceeds at a relatively slow pace. If business brings a new product or service to market and it fails, it can go back to the drawing board. If an education reform fails, young people's lives are profoundly affected. However, the need for an innate conservatism should not be used as an excuse for prevarication or the protection of self-interest. Hopefully, this is a more propitious time for considering reform. There is a growing acceptance that the dominance of the leaving certificate and the so-called "points race" poses a challenge in terms of what provides the best education experience for all of our young people.

Employers are less concerned about the qualification level than the relevance of job applicants' skills. These can be developed at all levels of education. Traditionally, Irish society

has placed too much value on the traditional academic model of attainment which does not serve all young people well. People learn in different ways and at different stages of their life. Therefore, we need a system that provides multiple progression routes and values experiential learning. We have provided the committee with a more detailed submission and responses to some of its questions, as well as some of our initial thinking on the review of the senior cycle programmes. We acknowledge some of the recent developments such as the introduction of computer science for the leaving certificate and new specifications for biology, physics and chemistry. However we need a much more extensive review across all programmes.

There is much to be learned from our experience with the junior cycle reforms. The new curriculum, even within its current limitations, sets out to embrace the kind of modern teaching, learning and assessment methods which are overwhelmingly supported by educationalists. Its key skills and statements of learning are also based on concepts that employers recognise and value. The success of any reform ultimately depends on what happens in the classroom. Therefore we recommend an independent review of the implementation challenges encountered during the two most significant, recent, curriculum reform programmes, the new junior cycle and Project Maths.

I will finish by making a more general comment on the so-called 21st century skills that we have heard about. In fact, with the possible exception of the most recent information technology development, they existed well before the 21st century and our ancestors have been using them for centuries. They have become more critical because a greater proportion of the jobs of the present and future rely on them than ever before. There does not need to be a trade-off between these skills and high-value academic outcomes which I confidently predict will be at the centre of debates around a reformed senior cycle, and this has been touched on in earlier opening statements. It is possible to teach maths through problem solving or to teach history through critical thinking, and these are the skills that business is looking for. Standardised tests can be used effectively in conjunction with other assessment methods. However, in systems such as the leaving certificate, where a few exams can have such a dramatic effect on an individual's educational opportunities and subsequent job prospects, there is not much space for critical thinking or creativity. For a significant cohort of our young people, this high stakes exam culture also kills the appetite for ongoing learning.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to be here and look forward to answering its questions.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Donohoe. We appreciate his having observed the time limit so closely. I now call Ms Sorchá Ní Chonghaile.

Ms Sorchá Ní Chonghaile: I thank the committee for the opportunity to present here today. My name is Sorchá Ní Chonghaile and I am the Oifigeach na Gaeilge with the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, ISSU. The ISSU is the umbrella body for second level students in Ireland. It raises the concerns of students and campaigns for better quality of education and access. Students are among the main stakeholders in education and we work to ensure that the student voice is heard on matters that concern us.

On curriculum reform, it is vital that each subject is reviewed individually. Subjects like the Irish language in particular require consultation with various partners, including those in sectors that are working in the Irish medium. Some subjects require urgent reforms, such as the leaving certificate art curriculum which has not been revised since 1972. The leaving certificate has also become too predictable and, as a result, there is a heavy focus on rote learning.

On assessment and examination timelines, the ISSU believes that many subjects do not provide enough continuous assessment opportunities and the focus on an end of year exam after a two-year period causes students, teachers and school staff extraordinary stress and anxiety. Many students suffer from ill health as a result of the workload and stress associated with the course. The examination timeline is almost cruel as students are assessed on two years' worth of learning in the space of two weeks at the very end. In the case of illness or family bereavement, there are no opportunities to repeat examinations for a further 12 months.

Our members feel there is a stigma attached to the leaving certificate applied course. The uptake is extremely low. According to the State Examinations Commission the uptake of leaving certificate applied is decreasing, at only 4.7% or 2,773 students in 2017, down from 5% in 2015. This is a clear indication that the leaving certificate applied does not cater to the needs of our students. It was imagined as a course that would also support student retention, but how the programme is recognised, credited and valued has proved an issue and, as such, participation remains low. This is a shame as there are potentially particular communities where young people are involved in the fishing, agricultural or equine industry that would benefit greatly from a reform of this course.

On learning environments and learning support, a student's success in the leaving certificate often depends on the school in which they are enrolled. Equity of access to learning support and a high quality learning environment is crucial for a successful leaving certificate result. Some schools struggle to provide basic elements like access to computers, high-speed broadband or other resources to support a student's learning. Personal development opportunities should be made available to teachers on digital education to support the increase of technology in the classroom, and schools need to be supported and funded efficiently if there are to be any reforms in the use of technology for the senior cycle course.

On examiners, recruitment and teacher assessments, the ISSU is aware of concerns among teachers that they will be required to assess their own students. However, for the well-being of second level students in Ireland, there must be a better balance between continuous assessment and exams throughout the two years. We are also aware of the issues in recruiting examiners. We suggest that graduates of specific subjects be given upskilling opportunities to become examiners to meet the shortages in this sector. Short courses for graduates of languages, science, etc. could be made available to qualify those who meet the criteria. This could be a similar model to the teaching English as a foreign language, TEFL, course which is available online or in part-time learning modules. Upskilling in this area could also support the development of a regional panel of examiners which could address the issues with recruitment and provide external examiners throughout the year to support teachers with continuous assessments and providing detailed feedback on students' performance.

The ISSU believes that a student's health supersedes any grades or points. Unfortunately, we are in a situation where stories of students falling to ill health, especially mental health, as a result of exam stresses are not uncommon. The fact that many people still experience so-called leaving cert dreams years on is a clue to how traumatic the experience can be.

Chairman: As Ms Ní Chonghaile is the only student voice here, I will give her a little extra time. Her statement includes a further six points, so perhaps she could take a couple of lines from each point.

Ms Sorcha Ní Chonghaile: On life skills training and preparation for the working world, transition year attempts to meet some of these needs but many students still feel unprepared for

the working world. A module or course on basic life skills is essential.

Trades and apprenticeships should be catered for. Just 2% of school leavers take up apprenticeships. Introducing a work-based learning model as a subject to the leaving certificate curriculum can attract more students to these alternative progression pathways.

There are issues around home-schooled students and distance learning support. The ISSU believes, however, that the level of support for families that opt to home-school is not sufficient. Leaving certificate reforms will need to consider the needs of home-schooled students and students who can no longer attend school and provide further online and distance learning support.

There are issues around progression from the junior cycle. In September 2018, the first group of students from the new junior cycle course will transfer to the senior cycle curriculum. These pupils must be catered for.

Other issues are the results from PISA, the question of league tables and evaluating our success. We need to modernise for the 21st century and deal with the over-emphasis in STEM. The range of foreign language courses available does not equate to the opportunities for students to study their desired language and is completely dependent on the availability of teachers and classroom space. Native speakers are also at a disadvantage as there are few language courses that meet their needs, particularly with the Irish language. Language subjects should be taught more for practical use, such as professions in the domains of education, law, and politics. We need to cater and protect the arts, creative arts and design, languages and philosophy. To echo the words of our Uachtarán, Michael D. Higgins, we need to introduce philosophy and ethical reflection to our learning, practising fair argument and respect for differences in our society.

Chairman: I thank Ms Ní Chonghaile. She has undoubtedly done her fellow students proud.

We now turn to the National Parents Council Post-Primary which is represented by Mr. Geoff Browne and Mr. Ross MacMahon. I do not know if they will split their time.

Mr. Geoff Browne: I thank the Chairman. Only I will speak. The National Parents' Council Post-Primary is a voluntary representative body of parents of children in second level education. I will refer to us as NPCPP. We are grateful for the committee's invitation and the opportunity to be involved in these discussions on the ongoing reform of the leaving certificate curriculum. The NPCPP strongly advocates reform of the leaving certificate and welcomes ongoing efforts to evaluate and adjust current practice in assessment methods within the education system in Ireland to prepare students, or perhaps I should say our children, better for further education and their future lives and careers. We also recognise the integrity of the leaving certificate examination and the work of the State Examinations Commission in ensuring fairness.

The NPCPP recognises the success of the revised points system, which has been introduced recently, which is evident even at this early stage of the scheme. While acknowledging that our education system has produced a broadly better educated population than existed in Ireland some generations ago, the relevance and results of our current methods of delivery and assessment have been called into question. Many informed commentators highlight the emphasis that the current system has on the requirement to recall information during the course of a single terminal examination. They suggest that this method is completely inadequate for assessing a pupil's actual knowledge and understanding of a subject. The methods of delivery and assessment currently used therefore can promote rote learning rather than the acquisition of real

knowledge. Only a small part of the student's overall intellectual ability is tested instead of an assessment of their true depth of knowledge and ability.

The curriculum should encourage exploration, enable students to discover their own talents and then enable them to develop their strengths in areas of genuine interest. This would then promote spontaneous growth in their knowledge and enhance their ability to contribute towards these areas in their future lives. We must heed the concerns of our third level educators and Irish business leaders when they tell us that students exiting the post-primary schools, following completion of the leaving certificate, are poorly prepared for further education and entry into the workforce. We must also listen to the health professionals. We must remember that our children are not just fodder for third level institutions or industry. Along with developing the desire and ability to analyse critically, solve problems and make decisions, we must teach our children the essential life skills and social values required to function as self-confident and mutually respectful citizens in our society and the multicultural world in which we live today.

Given the emphasis placed on one single examination at the end of the course, the leaving certificate and the current points system apply significant stress during what are already difficult years in our teenagers' lives. Through focusing on the development of a student's ability and interests, our education system can create self-motivated thinkers who learn and enjoy the benefits of discovery through research and evaluation in an environment that they can enjoy.

The leaving certificate curriculum should provide the facility and stimuli to promote curiosity, interest, analysis and critical thought. It should have a focus on studying to learn for the sake of knowledge itself. This will broaden the minds of students and empower them to progress in their own lives and will better prepare them for the challenges that lie ahead.

The National Parents Council Post-Primary, NPCPP, acknowledges that some changes have been made to facilitate students better in the way in which they learn and the relevancy of the curriculum. The leaving certificate applied and Project Maths are examples of this. The recent development of computer science as a subject is also welcome. While welcoming changes made to suit students better we have received many calls relating to these changes which indicate concern that once introduced, these new courses or subjects have been left to flounder without any real ongoing evaluation. When changes are made, ongoing monitoring and evaluation must form part of their introduction and implementation. This must be undertaken with a core focus on the students and how we can best serve their learning process.

Concerns about the leaving certificate have been raised and discussed for more than a decade. In 2011, following years of consultation with all stakeholders, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, introduced its original proposals to begin the reform of secondary education with the introduction of the junior cycle. This change was very broadly welcomed, but that happened six years ago - a complete post-primary school cycle for a child - and we are still awaiting full roll-out of the same. All constituents in the education system, Government, parents, teachers and schools, must work together to provide the education required to prepare children properly for their future lives. It is our collective responsibility and we are currently falling short in that duty. We all need to address this matter with the level of urgency and co-operation it demands. We look forward to continuing to participate in this process and we are committed to assisting as best we can to ensure that we have an education system that is fully fit for purpose and best serves our children.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Browne. We now move on to the officials from the Department of Education and Skills and we have two speakers, Mr. Eamonn Moran and Ms Ruth Richards. I

invite Mr. Moran to address the committee.

Mr. Eamonn Moran: I thank the chairman and members for the opportunity to make this opening statement to the committee. The Department of Education and Skills, together with colleagues from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, and the State Examinations Commission, SEC, have provided a joint written submission to the committee. We felt it appropriate to make a single opening statement, but my colleagues from SEC and the NCCA will be happy to speak separately, answering any questions that are raised.

I thank the contributors who have spoken for expressing their views, as this has provided some very useful information to inform our thinking in this matter. Our submission sets out developments in reforms at senior cycle level, otherwise known as the leaving certificate, including developments in the area of assessment, as well as providing views on a number of particular issues that the committee asked us to consider. I therefore will make only a short opening statement.

Reform activity in the leaving certificate can be seen as having three strands, covering the short term and moving to the longer-term spectrum. There has been the process of reviewing the existing subject specifications to take account, for example, of the need to update various elements of these specifications to reflect developments since they were first introduced.

Alternatively, revisions may take place to introduce new assessment components for subjects. Our written submission provides details of these revisions. Specifications for some new subjects are also being prioritised for development. This helps to ensure that curriculum development continues to respond to the changing needs of learners, society and the economy and also increases subject choice for students. Such examples include the new politics and society subject which has been in the process of being implemented in schools on a phased basis from September 2016. A contributor mentioned the new computer science subject, which is being progressed for phased implementation from September 2018, while a new examinable syllabus for leaving certificate physical education will also be rolled out to schools. In parallel, a non-examinable physical education framework will also be rolled out.

In the longer term, the NCCA has recently commenced an overall review of senior cycle programmes. This review includes the leaving certificate, the leaving certificate vocational programme, LCVP, the leaving certificate applied as well as vocational pathways in the senior cycle. The review will seek to build on the strengths of the current system towards a senior cycle where greater emphasis is placed on the balance between the acquisition of skills and knowledge, on learners taking more responsibility for their own learning, and on enhancing the learning culture and environment in schools. A public discussion and consultation process will take place as part of this review during 2018.

Implementing these various elements of reform activity must take account of the needs of schools to continue to deliver a senior cycle programme to the existing student cohorts and of the overall capacity of schools and the wider education system to manage the impact of change. There is a significant change agenda ongoing in the education system.

The process of senior cycle reform has identified a number of challenges and opportunities for the Department, the NCCA, the SEC and other education partners, including those present today. That needs to be addressed as the journey of reform continues. There are many stakeholders in the education system and this is one of the reasons that reform comes dropping more slowly than what people ideally want. Some of the challenges and opportunities that arose are

included in the issues that have been set out by members of the committee today, which we sought to address in our written submission. We are happy to discuss these further today. I thank the Chairman.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Moran. I now welcome the State Examinations Commission, which is represented by Mr. Aidan Farrell and Mr. Hugh McManus. Will Mr. Farrell address the committee?

Mr. Aidan Farrell: Chairman, as Mr. Moran said, we prepared a joint statement, which he delivered.

Chairman: I apologise. I was aware of that. The officials will have an opportunity to respond afterwards.

I need not have been as strict about allowing each speaker five minutes, so I apologise to the speakers whom I interrupted. I became befuddled by the large number of people in the room. We will go to the members now but I thank everybody for their opening statements and submissions. There are certainly some common themes. We acknowledge that teachers are the agents of change but it is important to have student input without a shadow of a doubt. Skills are the global currency of the 21st century and we undoubtedly need to develop the whole area of critical thinking and problem-solving skills among our young people. It is interesting to note the request for the possibility of being able to repeat the leaving certificate for those who have suffered bereavement or illness. This is certainly an important issue. The Committee on Public Petitions recently received a petition that another 30 minutes should be added on to the leaving certificate English exam. I wanted to mention that as this committee also received correspondence on it.

I call Deputy Thomas Byrne.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: An incredible range of views has been put forward by the various witnesses appearing here from a wide range of sectors and it is very helpful to the work we do. I may not go into everybody's individual contribution, but there are a number of common threads. One is that we must emphasise skills-based rather than knowledge-based learning. Do the witnesses have views on the fact that the acquisition of knowledge is also important in itself? Are we at times losing sight of this and putting too much emphasis on the acquisition of skills? I know that we can all get to access to knowledge ourselves and that we can get the skills to access that knowledge. Is it important still that a bedrock of knowledge is imparted to our children, despite all the talk of skills and showing people how to make their way in the modern world? I would be interested to hear contrarian views on this.

I would like to ask Mr. O'Rourke some questions about the Teaching Council. What impact is the current teacher shortage having on the curricula and on the leaving certificate? I am hearing, for example, that it is actually becoming very difficult to keep Irish as a compulsory subject due to a severe lack of teachers. Is there a problem there that will impact on the curriculum generally but particularly with regard to the leaving certificate? At present, we do not currently have a match between the requirements in certain subjects and the teachers we are educating. It seems quite random in that anyone with a degree can go on to do the teaching qualification without reference to any requirements that the State might have for a large number of science teachers or Irish teachers. There are too few teachers in some areas and too many in others. How is that affecting the curriculum and the leaving certificate at present?

I thank Ms Sorcha Ní Chonghaile for raising an exceptionally wide range of issues. The Chairman has already noted her point on repeat exams. She also mentioned broadband. Do any other witnesses, particularly those from the Department, have any comments to make on the impact of the lack of broadband? I know that there was a programme to give second level schools access to broadband, but is this a problem the Department sees at primary level? It is a major problem all around rural Ireland.

I agree with the points made about the teaching of philosophy and this is something that Uachtarán na hÉireann has also highlighted as very important. Philosophy is a compulsory subject in the European baccalaureate, but it is not on the Irish leaving certificate. Have any of the witnesses looked at the European baccalaureate? I would be interested to hear any views as to whether we should or should not be looking to it for inspiration or guidance as we undertake reform.

Issues have been raised in the media recently about the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. Without going into specific allegations, it has been suggested that there are difficulties in that organisation that are affecting its work and affecting curriculum development. I would like to check with the Chairman if I can ask questions about whether----

Chairman: I will not allow Deputy Byrne to ask any questions about that. It is obviously a matter of concern for all of us but it was raised in a protected disclosure to the Minister. I understand that he has already commenced an investigation and there should not be a parallel inquiry into that issue. I ask Deputy Byrne not to proceed any further with this matter.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Even with regard to curriculum development?

Chairman: No.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Okay. I accept the Chairman's ruling but I would certainly like to discuss that at some future stage because serious issues have been raised around curriculum development. I will leave my questions there. They were general enough but this is the start of our process on this and the statements were really helpful.

Chairman: I am now going to take four members at a time. Deputy Madigan is next.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the witnesses for all of their contributions. It is 30 years since I did my leaving certificate but I still remember it very clearly. I am not sure if the matric is still there but it was certainly there when I did my leaving certificate. We had the leaving certificate and then we had the matric immediately afterwards. Stress was not such a big issue in my day, but it is for students now. Schools are themselves under pressure to get the right exam results and this consequently goes onto the children and the parents. What can we do in a general way to help reduce the stress on students? How can we help them realise that it is not the end of the world if they do not get the results they want and there is life after the leaving certificate?

Regarding the leaving certificate applied, Ms Ní Chonghaile raised an important issue here about the uptake of this exam and the content of its modules. Deputy Byrne mentioned the NCAA in a different context. I know that it is carrying out a review on this matter, and the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, is compiling a discussion paper which will inform a review of the senior cycle system and will look at some of these issues. I would also like to ask about bonus points for subjects like maths. Has this actually encouraged students to take up the subject? If this is the case, could we use it to incentivise students to take up other

subjects? Could we consider it for other subjects? Could we also consider incorporating global trends, for example, east Asian economics or languages in the leaving certificate? I did a degree in languages myself before I did law and I know that we are very short in this country on foreign language speakers. This is something I would like to see addressed more proactively in schools, so perhaps one of the witnesses could talk about this.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: I also thank the contributors. I would like to talk about this in general and perhaps pick up first on the point made by Mr. Donohoe and others about the slow pace of change. This is a real concern for me. Obviously, I have experience of trying to deal with the slow pace of change and I spent many hours sitting across the table from education stakeholders. I am absolutely convinced that we need to change and move to things like classroom-based assessment and skills-based learning. We need to assess young people on the basis of something other than a three-hour exam in each subject after a two-year cycle. We need systems that match the modern world and match higher education. How can we now move on? When it comes to junior cycle reform, the train has already left the station and teachers are now working on different forms of assessment other than simply memorising and regurgitating material in written exams. This is very welcome.

My next question is a general one for whoever would like to answer it, particularly the representatives from the Department, the NCCA and perhaps the ISSI. Ms Ní Chonghaile pointed out in her statement that learning models in the senior cycle will need to complement the learning modules experienced in the junior cycle. How do we move it on? We have made a start in the junior cycle and I think it inevitable that this will translate up into senior cycle. How do make it speedier? The curriculum reforms mentioned in computer science and in politics and society, for example, have been in gestation for several years now. I have not been on this committee for very long so I do not know whether it is planned to bring in the teaching unions and management bodies on this issue, but they are essential to progress and to moving on the agenda. Everybody in this room is agreed that we need to move towards the reforms outlined here, but making it actually happen is what really concerns me. I am interested in hearing from any of the delegates who has a view on how we can make reform of the leaving certificate cycle quicker and how we can bring others along with us.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I thank the delegates for their statements and submissions. My first question is for the departmental officials.

While I welcome the reform, changes and new developments in respect of physical education, I have questions. This is not the first time I have raised the matter at the committee. There are schools which do not have a PE hall, including one in my constituency which has not had one for 37 years. I do not know, therefore, how the manner in which the rolling out of that subject as part of the leaving certificate programme will be fair and equitable. It is like saying to students taking music as a subject to leaving certificate level that all of the necessary resources will be provided but that when it rains, they will not have access to instruments, that they will not be able to play music and that they will not have music manuscripts. I do not know how that could be considered fair. Every school should have the same facilities and all students should have equal access.

It has come to my attention that there are schools in which there are more students who are exempt from taking Irish in the leaving certificate examinations - up to 32 in one classroom - than who are who taking it. What are the guidelines in that regard as it is not fair on either teacher or students? There can be a range of academic abilities in a class comprising 32 students, some of whom may have a requirement for special needs assistance which is not avail-

able because assistance is being provided in the classroom in which Irish is being taught. A teacher can be dealing with students ranging from A level to those with special needs to those coping with a language barrier and need assistance. Are there plans to address these issues in the leaving certificate reform programme?

There is a worrying trend with respect to the leaving certificate applied programme. Schools are opting out of offering the programme because it is not considered to be as attractive as the leaving certificate programme and also because it is not considered to attract the right type of student. How does the Department intend to tackle that issue? It must be brought to attention that on the day the leaving certificate examination results are issued students who have completed the leaving certificate applied programme are often overlooked and not interviewed. No spotlight is put on students who have spent two years doing their utmost to do well in aiming to achieve the distinction of passing the leaving certificate applied examinations.

Why will the review of the leaving certificate applied programme only include English and communications, mathematical applications and ICT? What about the subjects of music, the arts, languages, leisure and recreation and hotel and catering? Why are not they not included? Is it only the module descriptor that is included? Does that mean that there will still be key assignments to be completed? At the end of sixth year, as the departmental officials and, I am sure, everyone here know, the teachers are told to hold on to the key assignments completed until the end of September. How often have they been inspected? I know of a school in which never once have the key assignments completed by any child been inspected and this provision has been in place since the mid-1990s. With the module descriptor, there is a tendency for the teacher and the child to move to the key assignments and make sure they are completed, sometimes without critical thinking, and tick the appropriate box. One may find a few students have done the exact same work in the key assignments. It is a question of getting over the line. What about the practical achievements which are key elements of the leaving certificate applied programme? Why is that matter not being reviewed by the NCCA?

What information is given to students on the leaving certificate applied programme when it comes to choosing it? What information on and encouragement to participate in apprenticeships are given to students? Is it sporadic and does it depend on the career guidance teacher or the school? The statistic which shows that there has been a 2% take-up is frightening.

My final question is for the Department or the parents' council. Those students who have followed the new junior cycle programme have followed a different type of course as part of which they have embraced critical thinking, but to take English as an example, they will now move to learn by rote. What supports are in place for them? It is a leap into a different type of learning process because the reforms will not be implemented in time for them. In 2018 what supports will be in place for them to make the transition?

Mr. John Hammond: I join Mr. Moran in welcoming the various contributions that have been made. They are extremely rich and valuable in looking at the broad question of senior cycle reform and the advent of a review. I might pick up on two or three of the issues which have been raised. So many issues have been raised that I would love to spend the entire evening going through some of them.

On the leaving certificate applied programme, as has been indicated, we have commenced some work on specific modules. The reason is they are regarded as having priority as particular difficulties have arisen, particularly as regards modernisation. It is not the case, as has been suggested, that there are other aspects of the leaving certificate applied programme that do not

need review; it is simply a starting point. However, we argue that the main focus of attention should be on the review of the broader senior cycle programme, part of which would end up looking at the various senior cycle programmes and how well they fit together. There is no doubt, as we have heard, that the leaving certificate applied programme has had great successes. It meets a need and seems to work extremely well. It is a good quality programme. According to the ESRI which has done some work for us on it, the teaching associated with it and the learning experiences of students seem to have been well received. There is also a very good focus on skills and competencies. The weaknesses seem to be in the outcomes on leaving school, given that students sometimes have a pattern of unemployment in the labour market. There has always been a question with the leaving certificate applied programme and it is one that will have to be examined in the senior cycle review as to whether it should be ringfenced. There is also the question as to whether it is essentially a stand-alone programme which ends up reproducing social inequality and a stereotyping of leaving certificate applied programme students, to which a number of people have referred. The senior cycle review will have to look at the successes and the weaknesses and make some decisions on the future focus of the leaving certificate applied programme.

I mention in passing the senior cycle review, to which my colleague has referred. It represents an ideal basis for the work of the committee to find a voice and expression. The main areas on which it will focus are the overall identity and purposes of the senior cycle education programme. We know, as have heard this afternoon, that the senior cycle programme has many strengths, but we also know that it needs to be radically improved for those students whom it currently does not serve well.

There is the big question, and it has been raised this afternoon, of the degree to which a reformed senior cycle should establish continuity and progression with the kinds of reforms and changes that have taken place at junior cycle. It needs to examine the range of learning programmes and pathways available currently within senior cycle and whether we should look more closely at vocationally orientated pathways within the senior cycle programme for those students who are less academically orientated. The question of flexibility and choice for schools, and autonomy for schools and for students in terms of the choices they make, and the alignment of key skills with the needs of students are major questions that will emerge within the senior cycle review. We have been generating and commissioning international research to look at what is happening in other countries in regard to their upper secondary education systems. That paper will be the basis of a conference early in the new year, which will represent a starting point from the NCCA's perspective for real discussion around senior cycle review.

The last point I might take up at this stage is the one about pace in terms of the question of reform and the perceived lack of speed regarding reform. It is important to mention that when we talk about educational change, there are different elements to it. There is a developmental phase in which bodies like the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, are directly involved. There is the introduction of the change within the system which involves a wider audience. The longest phase of all is the actual realisation of the change within the classroom. When people talk about a 20 or 30 year period, it sounds like an incredibly long time, and it is, but the developmental phase might have taken two or three years. The implementation of it might have taken four or five years and it is generally reckoned that for a curriculum innovation to embed effectively within the system in terms of the teaching and learning students experience in the classroom that it can take up to seven or eight years. It is important to bear in mind that all of those points and issues feed into the whole question of pace.

We had an experience recently of significant reform at a significant level in the junior cycle. One of the things we have learned is the importance of communication in terms of getting buy-in from parents and stakeholders regarding the nature and purpose of the change and the commitment to that change.

In terms of the question of capacity building, many people say, when they look at the junior cycle reforms now, that we might have needed a capacity building phase before introducing the reforms. That is certainly something that could be looked at in a senior cycle context. There are many questions surrounding implementation arrangements and the involvement of the stakeholders. One of the Deputies has already referred to the need to bring each of the stakeholders on board for the kind of change involved in order for the change to be introduced smoothly. They are among the factors that are involved in what is a very complex process of generating curriculum change and ensuring that it is actually experienced at the level of the child.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Hammond for that in-depth analysis.

Dr. Katriona O'Sullivan: I want to respond to the question about stress. It would be my view, and I think other people said it, that reducing the emphasis on the terminal examination after two years would be the ideal way to reduce stress and move to a process where we have examinations and continuous assessment that are assessed throughout the senior cycle or prior to it.

We talk about the outcomes of the leaving certificate applied. The positive outcome of the leaving certificate applied is that the students are less stressed. The negative outcome is that they are not employable but the positive outcome is that they are less stressed. The students are in a curriculum that is focused on development skills and that is pre-vocational so there is some learning to be had from the ESRI report in terms of the content of the curriculum, how it is delivered in the leaving certificate applied and how that can be transferred over to the leaving certificate academic track. Stress can be reduced by including a skills-based focus.

The other response I wanted to make was on the question of whether knowledge is out the window, so to speak, now. Knowledge and skills go well together and if teachers are given the opportunity to develop the curriculum they are currently delivering and are supported to do that in a creative way we can keep the knowledge our education system is renowned for and deliver it in ways that make students more skilled and suitable for the employment market into which they are moving. I would be an advocate of knowledge but knowledge and skills can mesh very well together. There are excellent models being employed in Ireland and internationally where there is a combination of knowledge and skills. It is about resource and support across the education system. Teachers we have worked with in the project I have worked on want a change. There is a desire to change but when it is imposed upon them and there is lack of support in terms of broadband, technology and time away from the classroom to immerse themselves in this change, it will be challenging. Knowledge and skills are one, and it should remain that way.

Mr. Tony Donohoe: I was going to take that question from Deputy Thomas Byrne but Dr. O'Sullivan has described it very well. It is not that we are emphasising one over the other. It is just that the system as it stands puts a huge emphasis on recall of knowledge. There is an old truism in education policy about the assessment tail wagging the curriculum dog, and that is what tends to happen. It has an influence on teaching practice and what is valued in the classroom.

In terms of the baccalaureates, I have not seen any objective assessments of it but I have

heard within higher education that people who have come through the baccalaureates perform well. They are more liable to be strong, independent learners than people who might have gone to cramming schools in particular and might have performed well on the points but struggle when they get into higher education, whereas the baccalaureates provides a more rounded educational experience.

I will take some of Deputy Madigan's questions. On whether bonus points for mathematics worked, it definitely worked up to a point as it has almost doubled the percentage of people opting for the higher level paper. Has it improved mathematics standards? Probably not, and it was never designed to do that. Approximately 15% of young people take the higher level mathematics papers. By way of comparison, for English it is nearer to 70%, so there was a perception that mathematics was very difficult. It probably is but it was to incentivise people to take up the subject and also to compensate them for the huge amount of work that went into it. Those of us who advocated for this did not believe it would improve standards. Teaching and curriculum, like all education policies, is down to two fairly simple elements, namely, what we teach and how we teach it. It was around improving the competency of mathematics teachers, many of whom were out of field, in other words, they might have done mathematics as an element of another subject such as commerce, so it is important to develop their skills on which there was a lot of work.

There was also Project Maths, which was a very ambitious curriculum reform. It will be formally evaluated now; it has just gone through the complete cycle. From a business point of view, it was conceptually the right way to go because it located maths in context. Project maths puts a huge emphasis on problem-solving.

At all levels of the education system, I find languages to be the most intractable education policy challenge. I cannot think of anything that is more difficult to address. Ireland is an anglophone country. We will have to address the issue for a lot of reasons. We have never really developed an indigenous business sector and have tended to rely on foreign direct investment. That is because businesses tended not to look too far beyond the UK when it came to exporting. Brexit could change that. It will not change it overnight but we will have to diversify markets and language acquisition and cultural awareness will be an important part of that. We have been waiting years for a languages strategy from the Department. We tend to look at languages in a very piecemeal way. The committee asked what languages we should be learning. That is always an issue. I remember about 30 years ago trying to persuade the Government that we should be teaching Japanese. It was put on the curriculum. The Japanese economy went down the tubes at the time but it is still on the curriculum. I have included in my submission some of the considerations that might inform the choice of languages. The important point is to look at the connections between languages. There is an idea that if one learns a language, it is easier to learn a second. There are missed opportunities regarding Irish. We could have another debate about Irish and its place on the curriculum. There is a missed opportunity there. The way we teach languages is not optimal. It is a challenge with which every English-speaking country struggles.

Mr. John Doran: I echo the Deputy's concern about rising levels of anxiety. On Tuesday, the Minister, Deputy Zappone, released the So, How Was School Today? report. The levels of acute anxiety among girls is at 79% and among boys it is 67%. We need to put a focus on well-being. The chief of staff of the OECD, Gabriela Ramos, recently said if one feels good, one learns better and that there is a crucial connection between well-being, belonging and achievement. It is something of a concern.

I have consulted colleagues on the issue of languages and they are of the view there are huge difficulties with procuring teachers to teach languages. There was a concern that introducing more languages at upper secondary level was not appropriate and that we should be beginning earlier in the system. How we go about teaching those languages is also an issue.

They were the two issues that were coming up. I echo the concerns about the levels of anxiety.

Chairman: Mr. Doran will be pleased to hear that in the next part of our meeting we will be dealing with Comhairle na nÓg and the So, How Was School Today? report.

Ms Sorcha Ní Chonghaile: I will address a number of issues. First is the issue of knowledge-based learning. To learn, one requires the skills to absorb the knowledge and use it correctly. We cannot say that we need to have loads of knowledge but then have zero ability to problem-solve. What is the point of the knowledge without the skills to apply it?

Broadband is the second issue. I appreciate that the committee has acknowledged the difficulties, even in primary schools. A lot more secondary schools are now rolling out the use of iPads in the junior cycle and we would prefer if they were also available for the leaving certificate cycle. The issue is if schools do not have access to broadband, what use is the iPad or the use of a laptop or computer room?

The next issue is philosophy. As a subject, philosophy would be ideal because it would encourage ethical reflection and greater diversity among students. There are elements of it covered within the exam religion course but the level of take-up is severely low. I know many students who sat it but it is not a widely rolled out subject. Not many schools offer it. Offering a subject entirely based on philosophy and ethical reflection would be ideal.

Bonus points are a great incentive for students. There are students who take up higher maths just to pass it to get the extra points. It is helpful. It is a nice incentive because the course is extremely difficult and arduous. It might be an option to introduce it to other subjects that have a very high workload.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan referred to junior certificate English students who will be entering the rote-based leaving certificate English course. They will not be prepared for it because they have not come from a rote-learning background. That needs to be addressed urgently because they will have to sit the leaving certificate in 2019 or 2020. They will really struggle through it. They will be coming into fifth year next year with all of these books in front of them and they will be given the information, told to learn it and regurgitate it in an exam. They will have to face that.

Deputy Catherine Martin mentioned that there are more exemptions from studying Irish than students taking the course. It also needs to be understood that within a classroom of perhaps 30 students who are studying the Irish language curriculum, there are students who are fluent and students with only very basic Irish. That needs to be addressed. It would be ideal if the committee would take a further look at the matter.

A question was asked about what information we are given regarding leaving certificate applied in schools. It varies from school to school. There is no one answer to that question. Some schools will offer the leaving certificate applied course and their guidance counsellor will be brilliant at giving that information. Some schools will offer the course but their guidance counsellors will not give as much information. There are also schools that do not offer the leav-

ing certificate applied course. However, the guidance counsellor, principal, deputy principal or teachers could be telling students to go and sit it elsewhere. There is evidence of that happening in Dublin. There are students who are moving school to sit the leaving certificate applied course. There are also schools that do not offer it and do not tell their students it is an option elsewhere because they do not want to lose students. The other thing that was mentioned was that it does not make the school look attractive. No student chooses to go to a particular school. It is up to parents to choose the school and if the school had a wider range of areas to study, including the leaving certificate applied, leaving certificate vocational programme and also the established leaving certificate, it would be a lot more welcoming to students and parents. We need to give the information to students. There is an issue with guidance counselling and the fact there is no direct information being offered.

Somebody mentioned physical education. Some schools do not have gym halls. In some of our member schools, students are walking ten or 15 minutes to get to another school for physical education. If the committee is looking at offering it as a subject in a revised leaving certificate setting, every school will have to have the facilities. Students will want to sit the exam but they cannot if there is no way for them to do so.

All leaving certificate change requires that subjects to be offered to students. There is no point in saying we should offer 101 subjects but not make them available to students.

Chairman: I am conscious that there are a lot of members to whom I need to return. Four witnesses have indicated that they want to contribute. They should be brief in their contributions. We will be going back to members for questions and there will be an opportunity to respond.

Mr. Eamonn Moran: I will be very brief. Mr. Doran has already spoken about the leaving certificate applied so I will not refer to it. On the bonus points for maths, as colleagues mentioned, the percentage taking higher level maths in the 2017 leaving certificate is 30%, which is almost a doubling of what it was a number of years ago and which meets the targets set in the literacy and numeracy strategy. To that extent, it has been a success.

After what Mr. Donohoe said about Japanese, I am nearly afraid to say it but the foreign languages strategy, which is to be published shortly, will see the introduction of Mandarin Chinese as a leaving certificate subject. I hope the Chinese economy does not go down the tubes as a result. The languages strategy will contain a number of other measures to try to increase the uptake of languages in classrooms. It will also contain measures to address the acknowledged issue on the number of teachers. We also propose to introduce a number of other curricular language subjects at leaving certificate level.

Within the next few weeks, the new STEM policy statement for education will also be introduced. This will seek to identify a number of measures to improve the uptake of STEM subjects in schools, particularly by girls, which is identified as a problem.

I will make a general point on the concerns expressed about an excess focus on skills or marketisation in our reforms at senior cycle. The Department and the education partners in general are cognisant of the need to avoid producing students who will just go into the city or even leave the city. It is important to mention that the development in recent years of specifications for leaving certificate subjects requires the identification of a number of skills areas. The specification must cover a number of skills areas. Students must be literate and able to manage themselves and stay well. They must be able to manage information and thinking and they

must be numerate, creative and able to work with others and communicate. That broad range of skills was identified by a range of education partners as the essential skills for developing students with a rounded education following senior cycles and the views of business interests and educationalists on these skills were congruent. It was recognised that generic skills such as those mentioned should be prioritised over more specific employment-related or business-related skills. That is an important point to make.

On school facilities and access to broadband, it is acknowledged that not all schools have the same facilities as others. The Department makes grants available to schools to assist them in developing their infrastructure. The digital strategy for schools has a fund of €420 million which schools can access. The Department is not suggesting it is a panacea for all. However, it is recognised that some schools need those resources. One of the issues to be examined in terms of the introduction of leaving certificate physical education, PE, relates to ensuring that adequate infrastructure is in place for schools to provide the subject.

I do not know the full detail of it but the issue of Irish exemptions is currently being examined in the Department. The issues that were identified are some of those that are being examined.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I refer to the Department addressing the trend of schools opting out of offering the leaving certificate applied. In the reform of the leaving certificate, we cannot continue with a one-size-fits-all approach. We need to serve all our students. The leaving certificate applied needs to be reformed but it can be brilliant. Some students excel in it. It suits them. To avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, has the Department considered making it compulsory that all schools would offer the leaving certificate applied?

Mr. Eamonn Moran: As Mr. Hammond already mentioned, short-term measures are being taken with regard to some of the components of the leaving certificate applied. However, it is felt that the leaving certificate applied's future will be more adequately and appropriately addressed in the context of the wider reforms of the senior cycle. No one is suggesting that there is not a place for a programme such as the leaving certificate applied. While the numbers are low, they are steady. It is offered by approximately one third of schools and schools are encouraged to offer it. It is being looked at in the context of the wider review. However, there is no suggestion that there is no place for the leaving certificate applied.

Chairman: Is the Deputy happy with the answer?

Deputy Catherine Martin: It does not clarify the situation. No one is saying that there is not a place for the leaving certificate applied. The problem is that due to league tables, certain schools are not offering it to their students because they feel they can shed them to other schools. It is definitely an epidemic in Dublin. Schools are recommending to students to go to a school down the road which offers the leaving certificate applied because it would suit their needs because they are concentrating on the league tables and how they can excel and have that published in the national newspapers. This not fair on students. With respect, I encourage the Department to consider making it compulsory in order to stop that trend because that is where the stigma lies. As it stands, we are allowing schools to not offer that subject and therefore not serve all students equally.

Chairman: Mr. Browne had indicated next. I ask him to be very quick because members are waiting to come back in.

Mr. Geoff Browne: It might be very difficult for someone from Donegal to be very quick but I will do my best.

In an era of rote learning, we would like to see a continued exploration of the benefits of continuous assessment for the leaving certificate and that this would be kept on the agenda.

It is often said to us that subject choices are made based on how one can maximise points. It would also be interesting to see if there is a correlation between that approach and the attrition rate after first year in third level universities and colleges.

It has also been mentioned to us on a number of occasions that rechecks of leaving certificate papers can often be as late as October or November, which is too late for students intending to go on to third level. It would be good to see if we could prioritise the checking of papers of those who were only a couple of points off getting their first or second preference in university. Rechecks are often carried out where people have got their first preference and those could be put further down the priority list.

Deputy Catherine Martin spoke about the day on which the leaving certificate results come out. I have also often thought that it glorifies those who have achieved high points but it ignores all the other areas of achievement where schools and their students have been successful. The points do not highlight or measure that a school may have worked miracles by giving a child the confidence he or she needed to go out in the world. The points system and progression to third level do not highlight these or, as has been touched on a number of times, the number of children doing the leaving certificate applied and those who go on to do apprenticeships and post-leaving certificate courses. These are equally valuable avenues in career development.

It was interesting that the area of broadband was raised, which does highlight the digital divide that occurs. It was mentioned here in the context of schools but it is equally a problem for families in their houses, especially in rural areas of Ireland. It is not just about the school having access to broadband. For example, I live in a rural area of County Donegal where I get a speed of 500 Kbps yet my elderly mother, who lives in Donegal town, gets 50 Mbps. There is a digital divide.

Chairman: We take the point. I call Mr. Farrell from the State Examinations Commission.

Mr. Aidan Farrell: We have had a really interesting debate this afternoon on knowledge acquisition, skill development etc. in terms of the leaving certificate. Phrases such as “rote learning”, “memorisation” and so on have been used and they are used regularly when discussing the leaving certificate. When one considers the leaving certificate examination, its core purpose is to assess in the individual examinations the extent to which each and every student has met the objectives of the particular subject. There is a range of elements in every curriculum which must be tested in the examination system. The most basic of those is knowledge. After a three-year programme of study at junior cycle or a two-year programme of study at senior cycle, students will have engaged with a subject and it is quite reasonable to expect that they will have acquired a body of knowledge in respect of that particular area of study. In and of itself, it is important but also in terms of actually looking at the other requirements of the particular syllabus because without a body of knowledge to start with, it is very difficult to ask students to show that they understand it, can apply it or can bring analytical thinking or synthesis skills to it. One needs it in the first instance to be able to show that one has acquired some knowledge and then to be able to apply it.

It is probably fair to say that it is a poor enough examination if it rewards students who can learn off reams of material beforehand which can simply be replicated on the day of the exam. It is not a great examination if students do really well as a result of doing that. In the leaving certificate examination, however, the questions are framed in such a way as to force students to show that they understand, can apply and bring the higher order skills to bear. I am saying that based on some independent research that was undertaken a number of years ago by the University of Oxford and Queen's University in Belfast. Researchers reviewed the syllabi for six subjects in depth. They looked at the syllabi, the examination papers over a period of ten years in a row and the exam materials, that is, the scripts completed by candidates in those six subjects in one year. They then did something which had not been done internationally previously. They engaged with over 1,000 students and then with focus groups of teachers and students to find out how they prepared for the exams, how that preparation matched up with what happened in the exam hall and ultimately, what the results were like. The researchers found that students who focused too narrowly in terms of preparing for the exam, in other words, those who believed they knew what would come up in the exam and that they could ignore elements of the syllabus completely, did less well. The research also showed that our teachers believe that it is not possible for students to achieve very high marks in the leaving certificate without showing the higher order thinking skills that everybody is talking about and which are considered very important in the modern world. The research team concluded that predictability in the leaving certificate is not a problem.

The leaving certificate is an important examination and nobody can gainsay that. It is important in and of itself because students are obviously completing their second level education at that point but it is also important in terms of selection for third level. That makes it the ultimate high stakes examination. Students and their teachers and parents will focus really strategically in terms of preparing for the examination. Students will, quite rightly, use the material that is available to them. They will look at past papers, marking schemes, sample answers and so on, in the course of their preparation. That is a perfectly rational and understandable thing to do. Anyone who has ever gone for a job interview or for promotion will prepare for it in advance. Students are asked in the examination for that mix of knowledge, which is an important building block in any subject, and the associated higher order skills which are also important in a modern economy. The report itself is testimony to the strengths of the leaving certificate system.

I might just pick up on one point made by another contributors this afternoon with regard to students progressing from the new junior cycle English programme on to the leaving certificate. Undoubtedly, this is something that was in the minds of the NCCA when the programme itself was being designed and also, in terms of ourselves when the assessment for junior cycle was being designed. I am in absolutely no doubt that the space for progression is there. Our sense is that across all of the assessment modalities that exist in junior cycle English, between the classroom based assessments, the feedback from teachers, other assessments at school level and the examination itself, students who perform at the top end of the higher level junior cycle examination are well fit to progress to higher level English at leaving certificate level. I might also add that English was one of the subjects that the independent researchers looked at when they were looking at the predictability issue but they did not identify any problem around English. As independent reviewers of our system, they did not believe that rote learning or inappropriate learning are at the core of studying leaving certificate English or in the actual examination.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Farrell for that. It would be useful to get a copy of the research to which he referred. If we could circulate that to members, it would help in terms of the prepara-

tion of our report. The final speaker before I go to committee members is Mr. Ross MacMahon from the National Parents Council, NPC, Post Primary.

Mr. Ross MacMahon: I would like to make a point that has not been made today in regard to the new Irish. I understand that up to 17% of pupils in our schools are new Irish. Many of these students, as we know from our involvement in seminars with Maynooth University, are trying to fit into the Irish education system. We are trying to measure how they go through the Irish system but that system has one of the biggest infusions of new thinking and new ideas, whether that be Arabic, Latvian, Estonian or Polish culture and we should be looking at that very carefully to ensure that we do not try to just fit them in. We should be looking at this in the wider context because this is an opportunity for us, as an island, to reach out and we should be looking at our curriculum in that context.

The second point I would like to make relates to the speed of change which was referred to earlier. Everyone is agreed on the speed of change but we in the NPC would be very much aware that when we go through periods of change, we seem to come up against innumerable blockages, whether they are based on discussions around remuneration or other issues. I am not going to get into that now but I would point out that it is a major block to progress and it is our students, our children, who are the ones who cannot move through. We are trying to benchmark internationally and that is not good for Ireland.

My final point is on eclectic education. While there should be an emphasis on STEM, when we look at why software is good in this country, it can also be connected to language skills. STEM is very good and it is great to see diversity and women coming through in that area but we must not neglect the arts.

Chairman: I thank Mr. MacMahon and invite Deputy Funchion to speak.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I wish to make a few comments about the presentations and then I will put some questions to the Department. I read through Mr. Doran's statement before the meeting. His vision is exactly what we need in terms of our education system, particularly with regard to self belief and resilience. If students are not in the right frame of mind or are not feeling confident in themselves, they will never learn. In such circumstances, it does not matter how many grinds they can access. There is so much anxiety, low self esteem and mental health difficulties among pupils at both primary and secondary level. Difficulties can start at a very young age and the main problem is the one size fits all approach. I hated every day of secondary school. I literally counted down the days and could not wait to get out. We need to move away from that.

I am somewhat fearful, however, that some of the changes being proposed or made are just tokenistic. The introduction of an examination for PE or the idea that we might change one or two things is not enough. We need to completely reform the system. We need to have a lot more continuous assessment. We also need to do exactly what Ms Ní Chéilleachair suggested in terms of life skills. We need to be teaching basic things like nutrition, cooking, how to change a tyre on a car and so forth. People should be able to do those kinds of things and I really liked the way the witness phrased it - #adulthood. So many people, even in here, could do with learning some of those life skills. That is what we need to do. We need to be far more open minded and far less academic. Extra curricular activities need to count too. That is the approach we need to be taking at both primary and secondary levels. The focus should be on confidence and building up self-belief because these are key to everything. We often talk about mental health and childhood obesity but if one teaches skills on how to mind one's mental health and have

good nutrition, for example, one will have them for life, no matter what one does.

This is linked to the debate on the leaving certificate applied. It is nearly tokenistic in that it is kind of a gesture, on the basis that it might suit some students. A considerable number of schools will not offer it, however. There is a stigma; that is the reality. There has always been a stigma, as far as I can see, in regard to the leaving certificate applied. If we were to reform our education system so it would become much more broad and inclusive, we would not necessarily need to have a leaving certificate applied programme. The same system should apply to everybody. I hope this is the approach we are taking and that many of the points made, particularly by Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan, Mr. John Doran and Ms Siorcha Ní Chonghaile, are taken on board by the Department. This is key. If we are reforming now, we have a chance to achieve what I describe.

It is 18 years since I did my leaving certificate examination. I do not believe it has changed very much since then. To this day, I believe it was the worst experience I have had. Going through election campaigns and losing elections were far easier than doing the leaving certificate examination. We have to move away from that. The system is completely inequitable. If one can afford to pay for grinds, one might be able to get a pass in mathematics to get into college. If, however, one cannot afford to pay for grinds, one will not be able to do that. That is just one example of how unfair the system currently is. When talking about reform, we really need to consider radical reform, not just make minor changes here and there. We need to look far more at continuous assessment. This relates to the point Ms Siorcha Ní Chonghaile made on illness. People could be extremely sick on the day of an exam or completely panic about it. With continuous assessment, there is some backup. It is not just based on one exam. What I propose would reflect not just two years of work but a whole six years, in addition to one’s work in primary school before that. I hope the Department is taking on board some of the points that have been made because they are really good.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I welcome the delegates and thank them all for their contributions. We are all agreed that the leaving certificate needs reform. If we learned anything from this afternoon’s contributions, it is the scale of the task involved. Ms Ní Chonghaile mentioned the stress of the examination itself, as did others. In many cases, people have nightmares when they think about their examinations and what happened or did not happen.

A few questions spring to mind. People talk about the timescale and the delay in implementing change. In light of the journey we have travelled with junior certificate reform, is there anything we have learned that we could implement to fast-track the process of leaving certificate reform? I realise that is a very broad subject.

Reference was made to how fast of a world we move in. I acknowledge that it is a major undertaking to reform the leaving certificate programme, that there are so many stakeholders involved and that it takes time but, as was outlined, time is important. We are living in a fast-changing world and we need to keep that in mind as we proceed.

When we talk about mental well-being, we talk about physical well-being and skills for life. Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan alluded to changing the wheel of a car, or whatever the case may be. Is it possible to have a subject that encapsulates all this? It would be beneficial for every student, regardless of where he or she ends up. It is not just about shaping people for the workplace, although that is very important; if we do not end up at the end of process with a well-rounded individual, we will have more problems on our hands. Is it possible to have a subject that encapsulates all that? What would the timeframe be for getting that subject on the curriculum?

Nowadays, young people - we are blessed with a few in the audience this afternoon – are under more pressure than ever before. We have to be cognisant of that.

We talked about the challenges that exist and broadband. No later than yesterday, I received an email from a school principal in Monaghan stating he cannot get fibre broadband, which is causing a serious problem for himself, the teaching staff and the pupils in the school. Mr. Geoff Browne talked about the issue of broadband in schools. Also arising is the significant issue of broadband at home.

The NCCA comprises approximately 25 members. Is the size of the body an impediment to change? Is the group too large to develop curriculums in the future?

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank all the speakers. As some of what I wanted to ask was covered already, I will not go back over it. I agree with Deputy Funchion on continuous assessment. It has to be brought in somewhere. When I studied for the leaving certificate examinations, one read everything and everything was put up on the board. One learned it and took it down. Those days have changed.

On Ms Ní Chonghaile's statements, I have highlighted here the life skills training and preparation for the working world. This ties in with what Mr. Tony Donohoe from IBEC said. IBEC's statement claims the development of key skills at all levels of the education system has been a priority of business for many years. That has to be brought back to education. There is now an effort to introduce skills or training for transition year, for example, but perhaps it needs to be considered for the leaving certificate also. Much more emphasis is being put on apprenticeships, skills and training now. Perhaps some sort of complementary programme needs to be introduced at second level.

On the STEM subjects, Ms Ní Chonghaile said there may be too much emphasis. Where I am from, Limerick, they are finding there are not enough pupils taking up the STEM subjects. We have many engineering companies that are very anxious for people to train. They need people to do the STEM courses. There has to be a balance. I would like to hear how the Department will encourage people to take up the STEM subjects.

One of the speakers said the subject of art has not been reviewed since the 1970s. It is a very popular subject. It opens many doors in terms of creativity, including in fashion design. It is a subject that needs to be revamped.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I thank all the delegates for their presentations. There was a lot in them. I heard many speakers today. This is one of the debates in which I wished I was on the delegates' side making a submission because it is an area about which I am very passionate. Many years ago, I heard the statement that the leaving certificate examination treats all pupils equally. I believe that was the most ridiculous statement I heard in my life. There is nothing just, equal or fair about the leaving certificate. One has only to consider the resources available to the pupils who have to sit the examination to note that the moment they go through the school gate, inequality already exists. It has a bearing on how well they will do in the examinations, on access to grinds, on access to adequate teaching, on access to classrooms in which teachers are not teaching foundation students and higher-level students at the same time. I refer also to teachers who teach honours-level subjects to students and who are gearing subjects in this direction because they do not know how to teach at the required ordinary standard. These are just a few examples. It is not a fair system. If I had my way, I would scrap the leaving certificate examination completely and have full, continuous assessment throughout the year.

I am reminded of doing my degree in Trinity College Dublin. One of the delegates reminded me of a philosophy of time module I once took. There was 60% continuous assessment. When students enter third level, there is much more room for continuous assessment but they are not examined in that way anywhere else. There is much more room for continuous assessment and we are not examined in that way anywhere else.

There was a lot of information here today but I was not persuaded to thinking there were any solid suggestions on what we need to do and what reforms are required. There have been general statements but what are the key points on what we need to do? Dr. O'Sullivan spoke about the impact of the leaving certificate applied, LCA, on students. It is wrong to say that has been a success simply because students have enjoyed the course given that they are jobless. They are not considered for access to higher education. The witnesses can please correct me if I am wrong but my understanding is that they cannot even get into access programmes. Does that not reinforce inequality when one cannot even get into the programme designed to address inequality? That is a real failure in terms of many groups of children in this country. Perhaps Dr. O'Sullivan would speak a little more about the impact of the LCA on poorer children.

I have a question for all the witnesses. If one forgets the bureaucracy and the people who will block change in this area, and apart from the resources and support we know is needed, if there was a magic wand what would be the one thing they would change and how can we push forward to address that and change it? It is not good enough for people to have to wait a quarter of a century for change. We expect students to squeeze in two years of learning in two weeks and it takes us a quarter of a century to implement any reform. That does not match up. I would like the witnesses to indicate what is the one thing we can act on and change. The leaving certificate was changed years ago in terms of the history project, which was very welcome. I know children have benefitted greatly by being able to do the history project as part of their leaving certificate so if that is already in place for history what are the obstacles to rolling that out in the other exams, such as English and maths? Why has that element only been introduced for history?

I have one more question for all the witnesses. Given the proliferation of fake news, highly partisan media commentary and the increased fragmentation of politics around the world, how can we best incorporate the training of a highly informed and critical thinking Irish citizens within the reformed leaving certificate? The introduction of philosophy would help in the creation of critical thinkers and citizens who can actively engage with the level of information out there and to be able to work through fake news and to be able to find their way in the world. Do the witnesses agree that philosophy would provide that for students? Some school subjects do not really provide anything in terms of long-term achievements and progressing goals.

Chairman: I thank Senator Ruane. I will go back to the witnesses. I am conscious that we also have to meet a group from Comhairle na nÓg which has been here since 4 p.m. I again ask for brevity. I will give initial preference to those who have not spoken before.

Mr. John Halbert: I will be brief because I am conscious of the students outside. I wish to address two aspects. One is the speed of change and allied to that is the scale of the task. We have been here for a couple of hours and we have some sense of the divergence of views and the pressures on the system when it sets about changing.

I understand Senator Gallagher asked about the junior cycle and if we have learned something from that. Yes, we have learned the lesson that if someone says there is a simple answer he or she is wrong. There is no simple answer. All of the views that have been expressed here

are valid and the perspectives are valid and one can hear them coming from a real sense of personal experience. That is the real story here. Whether it is from Ms Ní Chonghaile or anybody else, people are experiencing or have experienced this and we owe a responsibility to be aware of that depth of experience when we undertake reform. We must be careful that we do not respond in any kind of knee-jerk capacity to individual experiences. We must look at the system as a whole.

There are no simple solutions and there is no quick response. We have learned many things from the experience of the junior cycle. One of them is the need to establish a shared idea of what the outcome might be and how it might look different. That is a serious issue for us as curricular developers and also for the committee members who are education partners and public representatives.

With regard to the idea that continuous assessment or any system is inherently fair, the system of education and curriculum reflects very often the society in which we live. If we have a societal change on our minds then it is certain that curriculum and assessment have a role. That is undoubted, but it cannot be seen as a replacement for a large societal change. That is a facile interpretation in many ways. I do not suggest anyone here has that interpretation but it will not work in a linear fashion. The notion that, for example, there is no ongoing assessment currently in the leaving certificate is wrong. Some 20 of the 34 subjects that are available in the leaving certificate currently have a second assessment component of some sort. It is not a case of changing everything to continuous assessment and we will solve our problems. It takes a deeper reflection than that.

I know the Chairman is under pressure, so I will make one final comment on the notion of transition from junior cycle to senior cycle and the idea that the change that has taken place at junior cycle will somehow impede learning at senior cycle. I contest that. A child who travels through the junior cycle in its new format is a better learner. People mentioned a reflective learner and the term “mutual respect” was used. That is exactly the kind of learner that the junior cycle is seeking to encourage. When the child reaches senior cycle he or she will encounter a different kind of learning until such time as the senior cycle reform has taken place. As a better learner, having completed the junior cycle he or she will be in a better position to adapt to any kind of learning demands that are made on him or her.

It has been said that we cannot take as a given that a particular syllabus at leaving certificate promotes rote learning. Teachers of English, which was mentioned, would feel in some way disrespected by that contention. The people who teach English do not set out to teach it in a manner that promotes rote learning, rather they set out to teach it in a manner that is true to the nature of their learning. That must be recognised.

Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc: I will go back to Deputy Byrne’s question on teacher supply and the capacity of that to impact on curricular reform. I have a brief comment on well-being but I am conscious of time. Like Deputy Byrne’s question, there are two planks to the answer on teacher supply. Teacher supply in and of itself does impact on the system’s capacity to implement and lead curricular reform, but there is an issue of wider capacity in the profession more broadly that I referred to in my opening remarks.

In terms of teacher supply, our remit is to advise the Department under the Teaching Council Act. We have produced two reports on it, an interim report in 2015 and a final report, *Striking the Balance*, in 2017. Based on a representative sample, about 70 post-primary schools, approximately 10% of such schools, it appears there is an imbalance in certain key subject areas

and in terms of the supply from the professional master of education, PME, in the concurrent programmes, on the one hand, and the demand from schools on the other. That would be borne out and reinforced by data we have received from management bodies in terms of shortages in subjects such as home economics, Irish, languages and STEM subjects. The council convened a representative forum on teacher supply of all the stakeholders which met on 5 October and we are planning to reconvene in May. We are also engaging with the Department on an ongoing basis on this matter. If one does not have teachers in classes to teach subjects, whether they are new, revised or otherwise that clearly does impact on a system's capacity but it is an issue on which we are working with all stakeholders.

That should not take away from the point I made in my opening statement about the capacity of the profession more broadly, beyond subjects, to lead curricular reform. We are seeing that transformation. Every year at FÉILTE, the festival of education in learning and teaching excellence, we see an incredible amount of innovation and great work being done by teachers in schools of all types to innovate their practice with students. That is happening already. When one looks at the enhanced capacity for research that we are leading through Croí, collaboration and research for ongoing innovation, there is an incredible thirst and hunger among teachers for research that is accessible and meaningful to them and there are many teachers conducting that research.

Senator Gallagher asked about well-being. We are part of the well-being for teachers and learners group with the Irish Primary Principals' Network, IPPN, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, NAPD, the Children's Ombudsman and the National Parents Council Primary. We held a conference last Saturday in Croke Park. While I understand there is a specific well-being provision in the junior cycle, there is also a clear learning from schools that showcased what they are doing now in terms of well-being for teachers and learners to the effect that a holistic whole-school culture and approach to well-being is vital. We were really impressed by the quality of practice among schools in that area, which they demonstrated at Croke Park last Saturday.

Dr. Katriona O'Sullivan: On Senator Ruane's question as to how the leaving certificate applied lets down working class students or students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the general leaving certificate programme is letting down a whole section of society because of the availability of resources such as access to grinds, family situations, resources in schools, pressure on time and on teachers.

The leaving certificate applied is selling a dream that is not real to students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. I have had conversations with many teachers who teach in affluent schools who have asked me to try to convince their schools to take on the leaving certificate applied. I am afraid to speak my mind openly in case I am not invited back here. However, there is a catch. To ensure school-finishing statistics remain high, these schools tend not to take it on and will not offer it.

It is well known in education spheres that low-income students are the ones most likely to end up on the vocational track. The problem is not that the leaving certificate applied is there. There should be vocational options available. It is the fact that no actual set curriculum is followed is the problem. The curriculum may be there but how it is implemented is optional. Forty teachers responded to the survey I sent to them and there is diversity across schools. The schools with fewer resources are offering a weaker curriculum. Those students end up unable to find work and deflated by the experience. Recently, a school in Inchicore was showcased on the news on how it had been pitched the leaving certificate applied but did not know students

who did it could not get into college or access programmes as a result. It is selling a dream that is not actually real.

The view around the leaving certificate in general is that it is not equal. It has a rote-learning element to it. I accept many of us succeed in that. On the two-year mark, if I was asked to prepare for an interview for two years, it would be a legal or human resources issue. I am not saying continuous assessment does not happen. The length of time between starting the leaving certificate and assessment after two years is too long. Were there examinations across that time and were the emphasis on that two-week period of examinations at the end of the cycle reduced, it might reduce the stress.

The mentality of teaching to the test, whereby schools compete for kudos in *The Irish Times* league tables, is actually causing significant difficulties in schools that want to support students and reform the system. We have to find a way of removing this final terminal examination on which students, schools and teachers are assessed. Senator Ruane asked for one suggestion in this regard. We need a skills focus and more continuous assessment. For me, whatever curriculum change happens, all schools should be empowered and supported to have equal opportunity to change their curricula and offer them to all students. If we do not, we will end up with an unequal society where those who have get ahead while those who do not continue to remain unemployed and in the same situation.

Ms Carmel Kearns: On Deputy Thomas Byrne's question of interplay between knowledge and skills, I endorse the contribution made on what can be a false dichotomy between knowledge and skills. In the Teaching Council when we refer to teachers' learning, we see it as much more complex. It is about knowledge, skills and competences. It is also about attitudes, values and dispositions. It is equally the case with students' learning. Building on what Mr. Aidan Farrell from the State Examinations Commission spoke about, it is probably not so much we should have the focus on those nouns such as "knowledge", "skills", "competences", "attitudes", "values" and "dispositions" but on the verbs we put with them. It is not just about acquiring knowledge but reflecting on that knowledge, discussing it, sharing and shaping it. Most importantly, it is about students and teachers working together as co-creators of knowledge.

Chairman: I thank all the witnesses. The committee appreciates their time and valuable contributions in this informative and interesting debate. It will not stop here. I have no doubt we will learn much more as time goes on. Some of what we heard today will be put into a report with recommendations to the Minister. If there is any additional information the witnesses want to add to the debate, they can send it to me or to the clerk to the committee. We will ensure this is circulated to all members and helps to inform our ongoing discussions.

Sitting suspended at 6.46 p.m. and resumed at 6.54 p.m.

Dáil na nÓg Delegate Report 2015: Discussion

Chairman: No. 6 on today's meeting is our engagement with delegates from Comhairle na nÓg. You are all welcome. I apologise for the first two parts of our meeting going on so long. We appreciate your patience. The purpose of this part of the meeting is to discuss with the delegates of Comhairle na nÓg the findings of the 2015 Dáil na nÓg delegate report and to examine the findings of the Comhairle na nÓg survey entitled, "So, how was school today?" The survey was referenced in our previous session and we took great delight in telling the wit-

nesses that we would have first-hand experience from discussing the matter with Comhairle na nÓg delegates this evening.

On behalf of the committee, I wish to welcome Kate Lehane, Kate Lancaster-Ryan, Hugh O'Reilly-Fitzgerald, Niamh Bakker, Craig Smith, Brigid O'Sullivan and Olive McGovern, who is the principal officer from the youth reform and citizen participation unit of the Department. When I was a member of Kildare County Council and mayor of the county I had considerable engagement with Kildare Comhairle na nÓg. It was always enjoyable and interesting. I am looking forward to the engagement. I will give everyone an opportunity to speak for a minute. You can say your name, where you are from and a little about your experience before we go to Ms McGovern. Then we will have the opportunity to speak to the members. The members may have some questions, which you can then respond to.

Before we continue, I wish to draw your attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2) (l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they give to the committee. If you are directed by myself, as Chairman, to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and you continue to do so, you are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of your evidence. You are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of the proceedings is to be given and you are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, you should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Any opening statements that you give to us, including the two we have received, will be published on our committee website after the meeting.

Ms Kate Lehane: My name is Kate and I am 17. I am from the Fingal Comhairle na nÓg. I have been on the comhairle for three years and on the national executive for two years.

Ms Kate Lancaster-Ryan: My name is Kate as well. I am the Sligo representative for Comhairle na nÓg. I have been on the Sligo comhairle for three years and on the national executive for two years. I am 18.

Chairman: Where are you from, Kate?

Ms Kate Lancaster-Ryan: Sligo.

Chairman: Sorry, I did not hear that.

Mr. Hugh O'Reilly-Fitzgerald: My name is Hugh O'Reilly-Fitzgerald. I am from Cork City Comhairle na nÓg. I have been a representative on comhairle for five years and on the national executive for a two-year term.

Ms Niamh Bakker: I am Niamh Bakker. I am the Laois representative on comhairle. I have been on Comhairle na nÓg for three years and on the national executive for two years. I am 18.

Mr. Craig Smith: My name is Craig Smith. I am a member of Waterford Comhairle na nÓg for three years and I have been on the national executive for two years. I am 17 years of age.

Ms Brigid O'Sullivan: My name is Brigid O'Sullivan. I am 17 years old. I have been on Cork County Comhairle na nÓg for three years and on the national executive for two years.

Chairman: We have a good geographical balance. Ms McGovern, please make your opening statement.

Ms Olive McGovern: I will only say a few words as the young people will really hold the floor.

I wish to respond to the item in the committee letter on how the Department implements the delegate report from each Dáil na nÓg. In each Dáil na nÓg an independent report writer produces a report of the deliberations and findings of the young people. Following each Dáil na nÓg, the Department establishes a steering committee of the relevant adult policy-makers to support the Comhairle na nÓg executive to implement the recommendations of the young people as reported in the Dáil na nÓg delegate report. The process for the 2015 Dáil na nÓg report and all previous sessions was the same as the process we will have next month for 2017.

Since the theme was education in this instance, the following committee members were brought to work with the Department: Professor Dymphna Devine, from UCD; Dr. Paul Downes from UCD, Clive Byrne from the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals; Jacqueline Ní Fhearghusa from the Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate; Carmel Corrigan, independent research; and Carmel Duggan, independent research. The committee also involved young people from the national executive along with staff from our Department and the participation team.

The group works as a steering committee to provide guidance and support to the young people on the national executive to give expert advice and get buy-in from relevant organisations where necessary and to attend meetings and answer questions raised by the national executive if required. That is by way of responding to the queries in correspondence from the committee regarding structures and systems which the Department has in place to support the young people on an ongoing basis. The rest of the time this evening is for the young people themselves.

Chairman: I thank Ms McGovern. Mr. Hugh O'Reilly-Fitzgerald will now give the committee an outline of the survey and the results.

Mr. Hugh O'Reilly-Fitzgerald: My name is Hugh O'Reilly-Fitzgerald and I am the Cork city representative on the Comhairle na nÓg national executive. Comhairle na nÓg is a network of local councils for children and young people aged 12 to 17 years to give them a voice on issues which affect them. The Comhairle na nÓg national executive has one representative from each of the 31 groups around the country. They work on recommendations from Dáil na nÓg and make changes for people in those areas. We meet monthly and have a two-year term of office.

I am joined by Ms Niamh Bakker from Laois, Ms Kate Lehane from Fingal, Ms Kate Lancaster-Ryan from Sligo, and Mr. Craig Smith and Ms Brigid O'Sullivan from the Comhairle in Waterford and County Cork who will discuss the results of the survey.

They will present the results of a survey that is unprecedented in size in its field. It was undertaken by some 3,242 people around the country. It is not possible to present all the data today but we will give its most important findings. My colleagues will highlight some of the findings which we felt was most significant about how young people are taught and how they learn in the classroom but members should be aware that there is much more data available. The survey asked 59 questions and the responses were analysed by gender, school year and the type of school. We urge all committee members to read the full report which was officially launched on 6 November at Firhouse Community College by the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Richard Bruton, and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Katherine Zappone.

I will now hand over to Ms Bakker who will discuss the first part of the survey.

Ms Niamh Bakker: My name is Niamh Bakker and I am the Laois representative on the Comhairle na nÓg national executive. The findings of our survey was published recently as a report entitled “So how was school today?”. It is important that the committee understands background to this research and where it came from. In 2014, at the Comhairle na nÓg national showcase, 500 young people voted that the areas of their lives in which they least had a say were school and education. As a result, school and education became the theme for Dáil na nÓg in 2015, where delegates voted that what happens in the classroom should be the priority question to be dealt with by the national executive. During the executive’s two-year term, it developed a survey to explore how students are taught and how they learn in the classroom. It was assisted by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Education and Skills, researchers from the School of Education in UCD and a steering committee of educational experts. The survey was completed by 3,242 young people at the 31 Comhairle na nÓg AGMs in late 2016. This is a huge number of respondents and is one of the most significant surveys carried out to date on young people’s educational experiences. Ms Kate Lehane will now discuss the results from section 1, which looks at pupils’ experience of teaching and learning in schools.

Ms Kate Lehane: My name is Kate Lehane and I am the Fingal representative on the Comhairle na nÓg national executive. Our survey asked students about their experience of teaching and learning in school. One student from County Waterford asked, “Have teachers been more energetic, enthusiastic and less monotone?”, although this only applies to certain teachers because some teachers already do this and make learning easier. Some 76% of students feel that other students get more attention than them. This is worrying as only 24% of students are satisfied with the attention distributed around the classroom. One student from Monaghan said: “Not all students are the same. One size does not fit all.” This sums up perfectly the fact that fewer than 50% of students say they learn best when they read from textbooks and only 30% of students say that teachers make learning interesting and fun.

Another issue arising from the survey is that only 36% of students agree that teachers allow students to explain themselves without conflict. Our survey asked students if they could change the teaching of three subjects in their school, which three would they pick. Maths came out as number one, followed by Irish and then English. This is a concerning but very important finding as they are the core subjects taught in Irish schools. However, not all the findings were negative. One first year student from County Cork said: “The teachers in my school are brilliant.” This shows that there are teachers doing it right with positive results, but we need to make it more widespread.

Kate Lancaster-Ryan will now discuss section 2 on feelings about school.

Ms Kate Lancaster-Ryan: My name is Kate Lancaster-Ryan and I am the Sligo representative on the Comhairle na nÓg national executive. Two thirds of students think there is too much emphasis on exams. This is a worryingly high figure. However, 42% think that exams are the best way to test learning. One student from County Clare said: “There should be less emphasis on exams. Students’ progress should be individual and not compared to others.” Some 64% of students wish there was more project work, something we all feel could be improved on, perhaps by the addition of more project work in the curriculum.

Unsurprisingly, exams were the biggest source of stress for students. Over half think that exams take over their lives in schools. Exams are particularly stressful for third, fifth and

sixth year students. Of those who indicated a preference when asked, “Do students have a say in schools?”, responses were split evenly between “Yes” and “No”, which shows that some schools are getting it right while others still have changes to make. Finally, a transition year student from County Cork said: “I think teachers should take our opinions on board because as young people our ideas are often new, relevant and innovative when it comes to things that affect us. We are, after all, the students.”

Ms Bakker will now discuss section 3 on young people’s views on services and IT in schools.

Ms Niamh Bakker: Section 3 relates to students’ views on services and IT in schools. I will first discuss levels of satisfaction for support services in schools which looks at matters such as the availability of career guidance, the availability and quality of counselling services and mental health supports and the amount and quality of learning support services. Overall, boys are more satisfied than girls with support services in schools. However, only 41% of students are satisfied with the quality of counselling and mental health support.

On IT, we looked at IT facilities, teachers’ ability to use IT in the classroom and whether IT helped students to learn. Some 88% of respondents think that IT in the classroom is not a waste of time, while 66% think IT helps them to learn. On the availability of these services, one student in County Dublin said: “We need more access to computers and online learning resources.” This suggests that an increase in funding for IT and technology-based support in schools will make learning more enjoyable and more effective for students.

On behalf of all the students who took part in this survey, we hope that the committee will consider our findings when making any further decisions which directly affect us. I thank the committee for listening.

Mr. Hugh O’Reilly-Fitzgerald: I thank my colleagues, Niamh Bakker, Kate Lehane and Kate Lancaster-Ryan for their excellent presentations of some of our key findings from the survey.

The purpose of this survey was to hear directly from young people about the way in which they are taught and how they learn in school. We had a huge response rate, from 3,242 young people, but we want to go further. We want our voice to make a difference in the classroom. We want the key messages from the research to be listened to and taken on board by schools and teachers, to make an impact beyond the survey and contribute to a broader discussion about the education system in Ireland. We are delighted that several positive developments have followed from the report of the survey, including the ongoing co-operation between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills to include the voice of children in the school inspection process. Another exciting opportunity is that members of the Comhairle na nÓg national executive have been invited to present at the inspectors’ conference in early 2018. A letter and infographic poster has been sent to all participating schools summarising the report’s key findings. We will have the opportunity to report the work on this survey and show the video of the launch to delegates at Dáil na nÓg on 6 December.

I thank everyone here for listening and I urge them to read the full report which contains additional information about the experience of young people in Irish classrooms and schools. We ask members to take note of the key findings of our research and to look for ways to bring them into their decision-making processes. The report is currently available on the Comhairle na nÓg website and we hope members will all join us in spreading the word by linking with us on social media and using the hashtag #HowWasSchool. Our contact details can also be found

on the last page of our presentation. We thank members very much for listening.

Chairman: I thank each of our witnesses. I wish that some of the adults we have in here would take the same approach to making a presentation and sticking to a good timeline. They have done very well.

I hope our witnesses had the opportunity to listen to our earlier discussion, which was about the possible reform of the leaving certificate. A lot of what they addressed in their presentations reflected issues that we were discussing. This is absolutely incredible work. I will now ask the members if they wish to ask questions or make comments.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I will be brief. I congratulate all the witnesses, including Ms Olive McGovern. It is great to see young people getting involved. There are too many passengers in school who just sit there and do not try to contribute, so it is great to see our witnesses' civic-mindedness coming out. They are all going to make great politicians some day. It is great to see the contribution they are making.

I was curious about the 59 questions that were asked. How did Comhairle na nÓg come up with those questions? It is good to hear Mr. Hugh Fitzgerald talk about the departmental co-operation between the Departments of Children and Youth Affairs and Education and Skills. It is very important that the views of Comhairle na nÓg are listened to and obviously this committee will do so. I welcome the news of the presentation that Comhairle na nÓg will be making to the inspectors' conference and of the video on 6 December. There is no point in doing surveys, with all the attendant work for the witnesses and Dáil na nÓg, unless they are actually going to go somewhere. The Chair of this committee is mindful of that and will encourage this committee to help in bringing forward Comhairle na nÓg's views. I thank the witnesses very much for coming in and giving their contribution. They are all extremely articulate and very accomplished.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank the witnesses for their presentation. They waited a very long time to give it. It is interesting that they appeared after the discussion on the possible reform of the leaving certificate. I completely agree with some of the points made about project work or continuous assessment. We need to see far more of that in our secondary school system. Some of the findings in the report concerned very high anxiety levels, particularly among female students suffering from exam stress. Apart from reforming the leaving certificate system, what would the witnesses like to see regarding the availability of counselling in schools? What are their ideas around mental health and how we can be better at that at secondary school level?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Like my colleagues, I commend the witnesses. They are fine ambassadors for the youth of our country. Our country is in good hands with them coming along. I wish to raise one or two questions. Regarding the well-being of our students, I alert our witnesses to the fact that last September this committee published a report on promoting positive mental health in our schools, which contained some key recommendations. We have forwarded that on to the Minister for his consideration.

Comhairle na nÓg's report shows that less than half of students are satisfied with counselling and career guidance services at their schools. Was that due to the reduction in career guidance or the standard of services that was available? Apart from career guidance, is there a need for a completely separate counsellor in schools to deal with students' well-being and mental health?

I am curious as to whether the witnesses have noticed any change in teaching techniques in their own experience of schools from, say, first to sixth year. Is there more active learning as inspections are looking for that from teachers? Alternatively, is it a generational thing, whereby the new generation of teachers is very much focused on active learning? Finally, I am interested in the witnesses' thoughts on inspections. At the moment it is just a questionnaire that some years fill out, or that parents of some students fill out. I refer to the management leadership learning inspection, MLL. What are the witnesses' thoughts on what they would like students' contribution to inspections to be?

Senator Lynn Ruane: I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I agreed with everything they said but there was one point that triggered a thought of my own struggles in schools with teachers and the experience of my daughters. Ms Lehane can correct me if I have picked this up wrongly but I believe she referred to a conflict with teachers when students try to explain, contribute or question. Can Ms Lehane speak a little bit more about that question and what it is about? In a school system it is usually frustrating when teachers are too afraid to leave the curriculum, even for a moment, to have dialogue and conversation. I know that I learn through participation and conversation and there was never much room for that in school. This always caused great conflict, with teachers telling students to be quiet or perceiving them to be disruptive because they wanted to engage in a conversation. The witnesses might speak a little more about the issue of conflict.

Chairman: Before I hand back to the witnesses, I would like to ask about one point. This committee has submitted a number of reports and recommendations to the Minister regarding different aspects of education. Deputy Catherine Martin referred to our report on positive mental health. We recently heard from witnesses on healthy eating and managing a healthy life in schools. As part of that, we discussed the presence of vending machines in schools, and the fact that they contain chocolate, crisps and things like that. We also discussed the availability of drinking water in schools and how important that is. If that came up at any stage in Comhairle na nÓg's research, it would be interesting to hear a little bit about it.

Mr. Hugh Fitzgerald: The first question came from Deputy Madigan, and concerned about the 59 questions and from where they came. Those questions were formulated over the course of about a year via what Comhairle na nÓg might call its own method of sourcing ideas. We use placemats, that is, students attending a conference would write on the entire tablecloth. As such, students might not have been actively speaking but they were still actively writing. Those tablecloths were sent off for analysis, and from that analysis we noticed recurring ideas. Certain questions, on gender or types of school, for example, were obligatory. However, the core questions on the fleshy subject matter that is education came from those placemats and from the mandate we got from the people.

Ms Niamh Bakker: There was a question about the availability of counselling and mental health supports. The rate of people who were satisfied with the availability of mental health supports was quite low. To us, the solution is to put extra money into having a counsellor in a school. In many schools we have spoken to through our national executive members and our own comhairlí, counsellors are only present one or twice a week, which is not sufficient for a whole school with 1,000 students. Having a counsellor there constantly would be much more beneficial and the rate of satisfaction would go through the roof if people had more access to counselling and mental health support. Staffing is the main issue.

Ms Brigid O'Sullivan: I also wish to speak about mental health supports because it is something that is raised a lot in my own school and comhairle and with people of my own age.

People are talking about it, especially if they go to the guidance counsellor in their own school. As well as that, awareness of what is out there is important. In the case of people who are not satisfied with the support services in their own school, some of that is attributable to simple things. A student may not get along with his or her guidance counsellor, for example, as their personalities just do not match. However, there are lots of support services outside school and schools should make more of an effort to make people aware of those mental health supports and how to go about getting them. From talking to people and on the basis of the guidance counselling provided in my school, I am aware that it is sometimes about the quality of support people receive or the days on which guidance counsellors might be in school. As Ms Bakker mentioned, some counsellors might only be in schools for half the week. Some of it is just about simple personality clashes because it is being dealt with on a one-to-one basis and it is really important that people know about all the support services.

Chairman: Would Mr. Smith or anyone else like to comment?

Mr. Craig Smith: Deputy Martin asked if we had noticed any changes in teaching techniques in our time in school. A lot of teachers in my school use the Magenta active learning principles in the classroom. We noticed that they change the desks in their classrooms into small groups and everyone can see the board as a result. Teachers also use something called Kahoot!, which is a quiz platform whereby a teacher can make up a quiz on the computer and it will produce a code for the quiz. We can join in on our smartphones and answer the questions. Personally, I have noticed changes in teaching techniques and methods in my six years in secondary school.

Ms Kate Lehane: I think it is a generational thing. I have seen changes but it is mainly with younger teachers. I recognise that some of the older or more seasoned teachers try new things but they are not entirely comfortable with it. Their usual method is to say “Learn this”. I have young teachers who try something new every week. I have one teacher who asks us what we want to learn at the start of every week. We all feel that we enjoy that a lot better than being told what we are going to learn. It helps me and the other students enjoy the classroom more. I see it more with younger teachers, those that are new to the profession, whereas with older teachers it is very much a case of “Learn this off by heart” and “Do this” or “Do that”. I see a change but mainly through younger teachers.

Ms Kate Lancaster-Ryan: I found as well that younger teachers would have new ideas and they would try to do active learning and new things. However, I think the curriculum is very much focused on rote learning for exams and then the younger teachers get really stressed out. We stop the new things and just start learning things by heart. I think teachers try but it is restricted by the way the curriculum is set up. Of course, that is my personal opinion.

Chairman: Does Mr. O'Reilly-Fitzgerald wish to comment?

Mr. Hugh O'Reilly-Fitzgerald: On the same question, I have certainly seen an increase in active learning. On the flip side, I also have seen an increase in teachers understanding that they are supposed to be implementing active learning but also I have definitely seen a push-back in that regard. When an inspector visits the school, I would notice that all of the tables were arranged, as Craig has said, in groups of four - two facing two. When the inspector leaves, they are promptly put back. Essentially, what I am trying to get across is that perhaps there would be a generation of old-school teachers, as Kate Lehane pointed out, who are not entirely willing to change. It is difficult, without surprise inspections, to see whether any change is actually being made, unfortunately.

Chairman: That is interesting. Does Ms O’Sullivan want to come back in?

Ms Brigid O’Sullivan: I also want to talk about the same topic. In junior certificate, I found that my teachers made much more effort toward active learning and doing projects. This was especially the case with history, where we did a lot of projects to understand topic better. We are a great deal more restricted at leaving certificate. The junior certificate course runs from first year to third year but with the leaving certificate is covered in bulk over fifth and sixth year. It is a lot more rote learning and we are really restricted by the curriculum. I feel it is really not possible to do the same with both cycles. The curriculum would have to change because during junior certificate cycle we had a lot more time to delve into projects and things like that. For leaving certificate cycle, it is lot of learning, doing tests and then more learning.

Chairman: Do members wish to make any final comments or seek clarifications? No. I thank all of the witnesses. It was interesting and insightful to listen to them describe the work they have done. It is incredible that they received so many responses. That is great credit to them, as is the fact that they are not going to let it rest there and that they are looking at so many other ways to engage other students. On behalf of the committee, I thank them for their time and energy and wish them well. They should keep up the good work. We look forward to hearing about their future patterns of work.

The joint committee adjourned at 7.25 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 19 December 2017.