

# **Junior Cycle Reform**

## **Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation**

**Teachers' Union of Ireland**

**Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**22 May 2015**

## Junior Cycle Reform

### Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation

#### Introduction

The contents of this document are presented by the Department of Education and Skills, the Teachers' Union of Ireland and the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland as a reasonable basis upon which reform should proceed.

In April 2015, Minister O'Sullivan described five immutable principles which must underpin any reform of the Junior Cycle. These are:

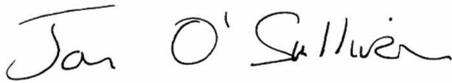
- The need to recognise a wide range of learning
- A requirement to considerably reduce the focus on one terminal examination as a means of assessing our students.
- The necessity of giving prominence and importance to classroom-based assessment.
- Greater professional collaboration between teachers to be a feature of our schools.
- Both parents/guardians and students to get a broader picture of students' learning throughout the whole of Junior Cycle.

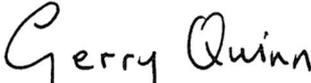
The principles have been endorsed by the Department and both teacher unions, as a reasonable basis for reform of the Junior Cycle. This document outlines a way forward for reform of the Junior Cycle, within the context of those principles.

We have sought to incorporate very substantial elements of previous documents where there is already agreement, and which deserve inclusion within the overall approach proposed. However, this document also includes some significant elements which depart from previous documents while preserving the nature of reform required to enhance the teaching and learning in our schools.

The document is proposed by the leadership of the Department, the ASTI and the TUI as a basis for agreement. It is agreed that time for teachers to engage with a reformed Junior Cycle will have to be provided. The office holders who are signatories to this document support and endorse the clearly stated positions included here. We believe that the document merits the wholehearted support of all education partners including members of trade unions, members of the Oireachtas, representatives of parents/guardians, students, management bodies and school leaders. The relevant elements of this agreement will be incorporated in a revised edition of *Junior Cycle Framework*, to be issued as soon as practicable by the Department of Education and Skills, and no later than the end of June 2015.

We publish this document today in good faith, with the express intention that it will form the basis for a ballot of trade union members, to take place as early as practicable in Autumn 2015.

  
Jan O'Sullivan  
**Minister for Education and Skills**

  
Gerry Quinn  
**President, TUI**

  
Philip Irwin  
**President, ASTI**

  
John MacGabhann  
**General Secretary, TUI**

  
Pat King  
**General Secretary, ASTI**

**Date:** 22 May 2015

## **Junior Cycle Reform - Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation**

### **Executive Summary**

This Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation outlines a way forward for Junior Cycle Reform agreed by the Department and both teacher unions. The document reflects our shared understanding of, and trust in, the many positive features of educational practice in post-primary schools. The proposals build on existing best practice in teaching, learning and assessment.

The Department and both teacher unions jointly endorse these proposals in a spirit of partnership and with a common commitment to work constructively together to implement successfully the Junior Cycle for the benefit of learners. The reform will also require the whole-hearted support of all the education partners.

The document is divided into five main sections – each one expanding upon one of the principles for reform which have been agreed.

### **1. Recognising a wide range of learning**

At the heart of Junior Cycle reform lies the need to build on our understanding of education, and to promote active and collaborative learning that will allow for a better balance between the development of subject knowledge, and the development of important life skills and thinking abilities. This section focuses to a significant degree on building upon the current best practice which exists across the system.

### **2. Reducing the focus on one terminal examination**

Much agreement is already in place around the need to reduce the maximum number of subjects which are examinable at Junior Cycle level, the need to shorten the exams themselves and to be more imaginative in the type of questions posed in exam settings, as well the need for wider types of learning to be recognised during these three important years of a young person's life.

This document outlines a dual approach, with the introduction of two structured classroom-based assessment components facilitated by teachers. For these Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) teachers will be able to select from a range of tasks appropriate to their subject set by the NCCA in consultation with the SEC. After the second of these, students will complete a written Assessment Task (AT) on what they have learned and the skills and competencies that they have developed in that assessment. This Assessment Task, along with the terminal examination at the end of third year, will be marked by the State Examinations Commission.

This dual approach will recognise and value the different types of learning that take place in schools, and will allow for a more rounded assessment of the education of each young person.

### **3. Giving prominence and importance to classroom based assessment**

Assessment supports learning over the three years of Junior Cycle, and also measures achievement at the end of those three years. To succeed in giving importance to formative assessment by the classroom teacher, the introduction of two structured Classroom-Based Assessments will be significant. One of these Classroom-Based Assessments will take place in second year, and the other during third year. Each assessment will be drawn from a variety of types of assessment, which might include project tasks, oral language tasks, investigations, practical or designing and making tasks, field studies and artistic performance.

The standards explained in section 4 will prevent any view developing that this work is lesser or secondary to any other form of assessment during the three years of Junior Cycle. These structured elements will build on a greater focus on assessment for learning in all classrooms.

#### **4. Greater professional collaboration between teachers**

Enabling professional development and collaboration between teachers, as well as enhancing the teaching and learning experience for students, lie at the heart of this agreement. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) will publish standards that describe performance on each type of assessment task at a number of different levels, as well as providing teachers with exemplars of student work at the different levels. This will be an important support to assist teachers with a clear framework within which to evaluate the work of students. To further support teachers, the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) support service will enable teachers to use the NCCA standards collaboratively with other teachers in the school.

Teachers will need structured time as well as support to develop such professional collaboration. Provision will have to be made for meetings and other collaborative activities between teachers, and this provision will need to be accommodated within each teacher's timetable. It is agreed that the reforms will not impose additional workload on our teachers. It is also acknowledged that teacher practice will adapt and develop significantly as a result of these reforms.

#### **5. Parents/guardians and students to get a broader picture of learning**

There are five different elements of learning at Junior Cycle, all of which must be valued and reported upon. These are:

- Ongoing formative assessments including routine teacher-designed tasks and tests
- Structured Classroom-Based Assessments conducted in second and third year
- Learning arising from short courses or Priority Learning Units
- The written Assessment Task following the second component that is submitted to the State Examinations Commission
- The results of the summative state examination

In addition to the above, it is acknowledged that schools value and affirm a range of other learning achievements of students in a variety of formal and informal ways. While many of these elements already form part of the work of teachers, it is recognised that the reporting on these elements may have workload implications and appropriate provision will be made for this.

Parents/guardians and students should be given a broad picture of students' learning. A range of standard reporting templates, appropriate to the second level curriculum context, will now be developed by the NCCA, covering all of these elements, for use in first, second and third year. The design of the templates will draw upon existing best practice in school reporting and enable schools to put in place practical and flexible reporting arrangements. Taken together, the assessment elements undertaken will provide a broad picture of the student's learning journey through the three years of Junior Cycle.

In September following completion of third year, the SEC will continue to issue a statement of grades for the elements they have assessed (in line with current practice) including the written Assessment Task which will follow the second Classroom-Based Assessment. Following this, before the end of the first term following the completion of the Junior Cycle, each student will receive a composite Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement from his/her school, which will capture all of the different assessment elements undertaken over the three years of Junior Cycle.

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## **JUNIOR CYCLE REFORM**

### **JOINT STATEMENT ON PRINCIPLES AND IMPLEMENTATION**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation outlines a way forward for Junior Cycle Reform agreed by the Department and both teacher unions. The document reflects our shared understanding of, and trust in, the many positive features of educational practice in post-primary schools. The proposals build on existing best practice in teaching, learning and assessment. They are intended to further build capacity to deliver the highest quality educational experience for students and better outcomes for them.

The new Junior Cycle will incorporate a modernised curriculum across all subjects and a balanced range of assessment modes that will help to deliver a learner experience appropriate to the needs of the 21st century.

This reform will depend to a very significant degree on the professional skills and abilities of our teachers and will require effective school leadership to create a supportive professional context for teacher collaboration. It is accepted that successful implementation will require systematic support from the Department of Education and Skills and involves a commitment to provide the necessary additional dedicated resources, including time and curriculum and assessment materials. The reform will also require the whole-hearted support of all the education partners.

The Department and both teacher unions jointly endorse these proposals in a spirit of partnership and with a common commitment to work constructively together to implement successfully the Junior Cycle for the benefit of learners.

#### **1. SUBJECTS AND SHORT COURSES**

The Junior Cycle programme will encompass learning in subjects or a combination of subjects and short courses. It will also encompass a range of other learning experiences. These are as set out in the *Junior Cycle Framework* (2012), with the following changes, which will be incorporated into a revised *Junior Cycle Framework* (2015) to be published by the end of June:

- 1.1. The possible combinations of subjects and short courses will be as described in the *Junior Cycle Framework* (2012), and will be reiterated in an updated framework, to be published by the end of June 2015.
- 1.2. Students will study a maximum of 10 subjects for state certification; each subject will require a minimum of 200 hours of learning other than English, Irish and Mathematics which will require a minimum of 240 hours of learning.
- 1.3. Students must also undertake learning in a new area entitled "Well-Being". This area of learning will incorporate Physical Education, SPHE (incorporating RSE) and CSPE. New programmes will be introduced for each of these elements of Well-Being and 400 hours will be available for the area. The NCCA will be asked to advise on the format of the appropriate assessment components for the area of Well-Being, having regard to current arrangements. To facilitate this development, the current CSPE syllabus will be retained for an additional academic year until 2018 and CSPE will be taught in addition to the 10 subjects described above.
- 1.4. As originally envisaged, a range of Level 2 qualifications will be available for students with very significant special educational needs.

- 1.5. Schools may offer students the opportunity to take a small number of short courses (using either short courses developed by the NCCA or short courses developed by the school); these short courses will be assessed through Classroom-Based Assessment, they will be reported upon to parents/guardians and student by the school; and will require 100 hours of learning so that two short courses will be the equivalent of one subject.
- 1.6. It is not the aim or intention that short courses should undermine or replace existing subjects. If necessary, the DES will issue a circular directing schools on this matter and advising them to limit the number of short courses that they offer.

## **FIVE KEY PRINCIPLES**

### **2. PRINCIPLE 1: RECOGNISING A WIDE RANGE OF LEARNING**

- 2.1. The curriculum and assessment arrangements in the new Junior Cycle will provide students with learning opportunities that strike a better balance between learning knowledge and developing a wide range of skills and thinking abilities. The curriculum will further promote an appropriate focus on active and collaborative learning and will enable learners to investigate issues, to explore, to think for themselves, to be creative in solving problems and to apply their learning to new challenges and situations. The implementation of these curriculum and assessment arrangements must, of course, take into account the needs of the students and the context of the school.
- 2.2. The changes to subject specifications and to assessment arrangements are designed to build on current best practices in the system and to support the further development of effective teaching approaches and engaging learning processes.
- 2.3. The introduction of a new subject specification with an unfamiliar format will need to be supported with high-quality CPD and ongoing guidance provided in relation to interpreting and implementing the curriculum specifications.
- 2.4. In addition to CPD, exemplar materials and complementary online support will be provided to assist the phased introduction of the curriculum. Teacher feedback and requests for clarification will be captured and collated on an ongoing basis at meetings and through the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) website and updated materials, resources and exemplars will be made available to support teachers and schools.
- 2.5. The NCCA will support teaching and learning through specifying a range of appropriate assessment modalities for each subject. Classroom-Based Assessments will be defined by the NCCA in consultation with the SEC and confirmed annually for each subject. Teachers will be able to choose from a number of confirmed assessment tasks designed by the NCCA for a particular Classroom-Based Assessment. This will enable teachers to choose Classroom-Based Assessments that best align with the school's particular curriculum programme and the learning needs of its students.
- 2.6. Classroom-Based Assessments will be undertaken by students in a defined time period within class contact time to a national timetable. The NCCA will provide a specific timeline for each classroom-based assessment and it will be requested to ensure that the nature and extent of the assessments can reasonably be delivered within these constraints and within the allocated time (240 hours or 200 hours, as appropriate) for the subject. It will also be requested to pay particular attention to avoiding 'over-assessment' and the cumulative burden on students and teachers of multiple assessments across the full range of subjects. In this context, the classroom-based assessments will substitute other assessments currently undertaken in the school such as in-house examinations, etc. as appropriate

**3. PRINCIPLE 2: REDUCING THE FOCUS ON ONE TERMINAL EXAMINATION**

- 3.1. An externally set and marked subject examination has an important summative role to play in the assessment of students' learning, and revised and improved terminal examinations will be one of the elements of assessment during the junior cycle.
- 3.2. It is recognised, however, that where the terminal examination dominates, it narrows the teaching and learning experience. For this reason, a dual approach to assessment, involving classroom-based assessment across the three years and a final externally assessed, State-certified examination can enable the appropriate balance between preparing students for examinations and facilitating creative thinking, engaged learning and better outcomes for students.
- 3.3. Externally set and marked subject examinations, of no longer than two hours, will complement classroom-based assessment of students' achievements. The external examinations will be set, held and marked by the State Examinations Commission (SEC). The examinations will be held in the month of June in third year.
- 3.4. The NCCA and the SEC will be requested to work in close collaboration to ensure that the examinations assess a broad range of knowledge, skills and competences. This will also ensure that question items and formats align positively with the learning objectives in the revised curriculum specifications. Student achievement in the examinations will be reported using a set of grades. Student appeals regarding the State certified examination will be processed as per the current appeals arrangements.
- 3.5. The current provision of the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) will continue for the present. The Department has already signalled that JCSP will be subject to a review at a future date when a substantial proportion of the revised Junior Cycle programme is in place.
- 3.6. Teachers will foster learner engagement through facilitating students to prepare for and engage in a workable system of structured Classroom-Based Assessment. A significant purpose of the structured Classroom-Based Assessments will be to facilitate developmental feedback to students during their engagement in the assessment task and at the end of the process.
- 3.7. Examples of Classroom-Based Assessments include but are not limited to project tasks, oral language tasks, investigations, practical or designing and making tasks, field studies and artistic performance.
- 3.8. In each subject students will undertake two structured Classroom-Based Assessments. One Classroom-Based Assessment will be completed in second year and a second Classroom-Based Assessment in third year. The structured Classroom-Based Assessments will be selected by the teacher from a number of possible assessment options for the subject.
- 3.9. The Classroom-Based Assessment undertaken by students in third year will have two elements. It will involve formative assessment facilitated by teachers similar to the first Classroom-Based Assessment. In addition the second Classroom-Based Assessment will have a formal written Assessment Task (AT) that is submitted to the State Examinations Commission to be marked along with the terminal examination in the subject for State certification purposes.
- 3.10. The Assessment Task will be based on the topic or task undertaken in the second Classroom-Based Assessment. Following the Classroom-Based Assessment facilitated by the teacher, the students will complete a written Assessment Task in class time which will not be marked by the class teacher, but will be sent for external marking as part of the State Certified examination.
- 3.11. The written Assessment Task will be specified by the NCCA and will be related to the learning objectives of the second Classroom-Based Assessment. For example, it may require the student to demonstrate an understanding of the knowledge and skills developed during the second Classroom-Based Assessment and facilitate the student to highlight key learning points that have impacted on the student in relation to the topic. The written Assessment Task may also provide an opportunity for students to refer to skills and competences that were developed and describe ways in which their learning might be applied to new situations.

- 3.12. The Assessment Task will be completed in class under the supervision of the teacher and will be sent to SEC for marking along with the student script for that subject when the written examination is taken in June.
- 3.13. Marks for the Assessment Task in each subject will be incorporated into the presentation of the grade for that subject on the State Certificate.
- 3.14. In the case of a small number of subjects (Art, Music, Home Economics and the Technology subjects) the second Classroom-Based Assessment will involve the creation of an artefact or a performance. The formative assessment related to the production of these artefacts and performances will be reported upon to the student and parent/guardian by the school as for all other second Classroom-Based Assessments. However, as the finished artefacts and performances are currently marked by the State Examinations Commission, the artefact or performance (for example, the piece of art or project work created by the student) will continue to be marked by SEC, together with the related written evidence as appropriate.

#### **4. PRINCIPLE 3: GIVING PROMINENCE AND IMPORTANCE TO CLASSROOM-BASED ASSESSMENT**

- 4.1. As well as measuring achievement at the end of the cycle through summative assessment, the use of Formative Assessment across the three years of the Junior Cycle programme allows assessment to support learning during the learning process. Effective feedback dramatically improves standards of learning.
- 4.2. Embedding assessment for learning (AfL) as the prevailing culture will require a thorough focus on continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers.
- 4.3. Assessments will describe the achievement of students using a nationally determined, common set of descriptors (not numerical marks) to describe the student's achievement.
- 4.4. For each Classroom-Based Assessment, the NCCA will articulate standards or reference points that describe performance on the Classroom-Based Assessment at a number of levels. These descriptors will be accompanied by exemplars of students' work at the different levels. The provision of standards and exemplars of work will provide teachers with a clear framework within which to evaluate the work of their own students for formative assessment purposes.
- 4.5. In addition, opportunities for regular professional dialogue among teachers will be required to support them in facilitating formative Classroom-Based Assessment. In that context the JCT will enable teachers to use the NCCA standards collaboratively with other subject teachers.
- 4.6. CPD support will also be provided to assist teachers with developing their expertise in providing developmental feedback to students and facilitating discussion and reporting to parents/guardians on students' learning and progress.
- 4.7. Students will be encouraged throughout Junior Cycle to reflect on their own learning and progress and to retain evidence of this learning and progress.
- 4.8. Standard reporting templates will be used to report annually to parents/guardians on students' learning and progress.
- 4.9. It is recognised that teachers of English are the first cohort of teachers to engage directly with the Junior Cycle reform and that they will make a very particular contribution to the successful introduction of the new curriculum and assessment arrangements. The feedback from these teachers of English to date makes clear that they have particular CPD needs and that significant adjustments are required to the first Classroom-Based Assessments for English to be completed in Spring 2016. In regard to the group of students currently in first year (in the 2014/15 school year), teachers and schools will have the option of having their students complete the first classroom-based component either in spring of 2016 (in second year) or early in autumn 2016 (in the beginning of third year). In view of the urgency of supporting these teachers in implementing the second year English course in the 2015/16 school year, immediate priority will

be given to providing intensive CPD for this subject as well as whole-school CPD for Junior Cycle. The CPD programme for English will be informed by appropriate input from these teachers.

- 4.10. The NCCA will specify a wider range of assessment options that will enable English teachers to ensure that the first Classroom-Based Assessment is manageable and appropriate to the learning needs of students.

## **5. PRINCIPLE 4: GREATER PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION BETWEEN TEACHERS**

- 5.1. Schools should be supported to develop a collegial professional culture.
- 5.2. Embedding the various aspects and operations of Assessment for Learning (AfL) will require that provision be made within teacher timetables for meetings and other collaborative activities at subject and whole-school level.
- 5.3. All teachers of each subject involved in teaching and assessing the classroom-based components in the school will engage in *Subject Learning and Assessment Review* meetings where they will share and discuss samples of their assessments of students' work and build common understanding about the quality of students' learning. This structured support for Classroom-Based Assessments will help to ensure consistency and fairness within and across schools in the appraisal of student learning.
- 5.4. Where there is a single teacher of the subject in a school, the teacher can be facilitated to participate in a *Subject Learning and Assessment Review* meeting in a nearby school.
- 5.5. It is accepted that there will be timetabling implications for schools arising from the commitment to support professional collaboration among teachers and implications for leadership within schools arising from the significant changes that will be taking place in teaching, learning and assessment at Junior Cycle.
- 5.6. It is agreed that the reforms will not impose additional workload and time demands on teachers. It is also acknowledged that teachers' professional practice will adapt and develop significantly as a result of these reforms.

## **6. PRINCIPLE 5: A BROADER PICTURE OF EACH STUDENT'S LEARNING THROUGHOUT THE JUNIOR CYCLE**

- 6.1. In line with best practice, all of the learning opportunities and experiences encountered during the Junior Cycle should be valued, acknowledged and affirmed. These elements<sup>1</sup> include:
  - o Ongoing formative assessments including routine teacher-designed tasks and tests
  - o Structured Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) conducted in second and third year
  - o Learning arising from short courses or Priority Learning Units
  - o The written Assessment Task (AT) from the second component that is submitted to the State Examinations Commission
  - o The results of the summative Junior Certificate examination
- 6.2. In addition to the above, it is acknowledged that schools value and affirm a range of other learning achievements of students in a variety of formal and informal ways.

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<sup>1</sup>The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy envisages the introduction of full-cohort standardised testing of English, Maths and Science in English-medium schools in second year (and of Irish, English, Maths and Science in Irish-medium schools). It is envisaged that these tests are to be phased in over a period of time. While not an element of the revised Junior Cycle programme, it is accepted that the introduction of such testing will have an impact on the cumulative assessment burden for second-year students and may have an impact on teachers' time. Consequently, the Department will review time for, and the phasing of, the introduction of such testing in schools. The implementation of sample-based testing for research studies such as PISA, TIMSS, etc. is unaffected by this provision.

- 6.3. During the three years of Junior Cycle formal oral and written feedback to parents/guardians and students will be essential so that they can support the student to build on strengths and address areas where learning can improve. Existing parent-teacher meetings provide an important opportunity to communicate the outcomes of classroom-based assessments and affirm other learning experiences.
- 6.4. Parents/guardians and students should be given a broad picture of each student's learning. A range of standard reporting templates, appropriate to the second level curriculum context, will now be developed by the NCCA, covering all of these elements, for use in first, second and third year. The design of the templates will draw upon existing best practice in school reporting and enable schools to put in place practical and flexible reporting arrangements. Taken together, the assessment elements undertaken will provide a broad picture of the student's learning journey through the three years of Junior Cycle.
- 6.5. In September following completion of third year, the SEC will continue to issue a statement of grades for the elements they have assessed (in line with current practice) including the written Assessment Task which will follow the second Classroom-Based Assessment. Following this, before the end of the first term following the completion of the Junior Cycle, each student will receive a composite Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement from his/her school, which will capture all of the different assessment elements undertaken over the three years of Junior Cycle. This will give appropriate recognition to the formative and summative assessment approaches embedded in the new Junior Cycle.

## 7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1. The relevant elements of this agreement will be incorporated in a revised edition of *Junior Cycle Framework*, to be issued as soon as practicable by the Department of Education and Skills, and no later than the end of June 2015.
- 7.2. Particular attention will be focussed on ensuring that teachers of English are fully supported to implement the new curriculum and assessment arrangements. The views of teachers of English and their representatives will inform the design of the CPD and other supports that will be put in place.
- 7.3. It is accepted that the various workload implications of implementation of the Framework will have to be accommodated within teachers' timetables. Intensive discussions in this regard will advance without delay and will be completed by the end of June 2015.
- 7.4. Implementation of this agreement will be monitored by an implementation committee comprised of representatives of the signatories to the agreement.