An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation

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Message from the Child Advisory Group

"We loved taking part and that our voices were heard. We felt that we were taken seriously and were given time to talk and think. We liked that we were trusted to help with these activities. In the future, we hope that more children, in all schools, will be given a voice when things are being decided. We hope that our voices are heard loud and clear and that our input in this project will make a difference."

Message from the Youth Advisory Group

"It was a good idea to ask us for our viewpoints on how we should be heard. We felt heard and everyone participated. It was very interactive. We think that it is important that the department makes sure that all student voices are heard, including students with additional needs."

Message from Minister Norma Foley TD

"I would like to thank the children and young people and the expert group for their work on this report. You have given us lots of ideas for how we can get better at listening to children and young people. Your voices have made a difference."

Message from the Secretary General, Bernie McNally

"I am very happy that we have this report which will help the Department of Education to make sure that we are better at listening to children and young people when we develop policy and make decisions. Your voice matters and will shape how we do our work."

Message from Professor Laura Lundy

"It is students' right to be heard when decisions are made that affect them. We learnt so much from all of the students who gave us advice on how best the Department can do that. It started with you."

What the Expert Group on Student Participation was asked to do

Children and young people have a right to have their voices heard and taken seriously in all matters that affect them.

The expert group on student participation was asked to give the Department of Education advice on how to improve its work on listening to the views of children and young people when developing department policy.

Professor Laura Lundy, who developed the Lundy Model of Children's Participation, led the expert group. The group consisted of 25 members and included students, people working in education and policymakers.

The membership of the expert group can be found at gov.ie/itstartswithyou

How the Expert Group went about its work

The expert group on student participation met ten times between May 2023 and September 2024. It gathered lots of information.

The expert group looked at what was happening inside the Department of Education already and thought about what was happening in other places too.

For example, all sections of the Department of Education completed a survey to tell the expert group what they were doing to listen to children and young people when developing policy.

The expert group also asked lots of national and international experts to share their experiences of involving children and young people in policy making.

The expert group has developed a background report about its work.

The report can be found at gov.ie/itstartswithyou

The most important part of the work of the expert group was listening to children and young people.

Ten primary school students formed a child advisory group, and ten post-primary school students formed a youth advisory group. These advisory groups helped the expert group to design how consultations with other children and young people should happen. They decided that focus groups would work best in most cases and advised on the questions and activities to use.

Through the use of focus groups, 174 children and young people from different backgrounds told the expert group about how the Department of Education could listen to their views.

The report on these important consultations can be found at gov.ie/itstartswithyou

During the consultations, children and young people spoke about:

Space where could be a good place for children and young people to feel happy and safe to give their views

Voice how the department could help children and young people to give their views

Audience how children and young people could know that their views have been listened to by the department

Influence how children and young people could know that their views have been acted upon by the department

What Students said about student participation

Space

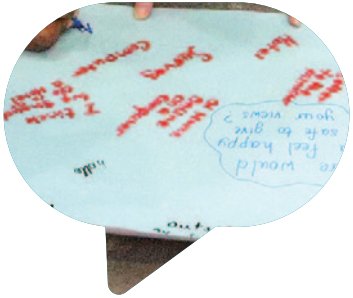
Where could be a good place for children and young people to feel happy and safe to give their views

Providing different spaces and places to listen to children and young people that meets their individual needs.

"some people don't feel confident face to face – give them other options, for example, voice notes or a survey they can do with their teacher"

Making sure that the space is safe, quiet, relaxed, and has food.

"somewhere that doesn't look like a classroom"



Some Ukrainian young people said that they would like consultations in outdoor spaces suitable for young people.

"young people know that area is made for them"; "youth café"

Some girls from the Travelling community feel happier to meet with other girls from the Travelling community.

"away from other students, and not being judged"

Working with small groups rather than large groups like assemblies.

"when doing meetings in schools I'd rather do it in a small group than a big group because more people make people nervous"

Allowing children and young people to take part with their friends.

"to find a place where you are with your friends"

Voice

How the department could help children and young people to give their views

Having adults that children and young people can trust.

"It's not the location that matters – it's the people you are sharing your ideas with – if they are trustworthy"

Using child-friendly communications and translate these into different languages.

"simple language, don't over complicate"

Having lots of ways to listen to children and young people.

"cannot all be on the student council"

Arranging for an interpreter and the use of Irish Sign Language to help children and young people who need these supports.

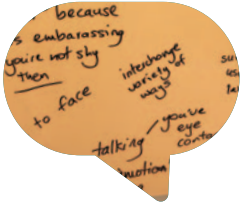
"Interpreter, it's important because it's difficult without them, comprehension is very important"

The age of the person who is seeking their views is not important to children and young people.

"it doesn't matter what age as long as they're understanding"

Being sensitive to the feelings of children and young people and respect everyone's right to participate.

"If a teacher thinks you are a messer, they don't let you speak"



Audience

How children and young people could know that their views have been listened to by the department

Having a record taken of what children and young people say at consultations.

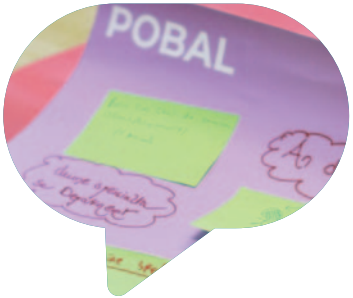
"notes on what everyone had to say"

Children and young people valued meeting the Minister for Education.

"If the Minister is there we can realise how important it is"

Having department officials present at consultations.

"more regular visits by department people to meet and talk with students in schools"



Replies to children and young people should be encouraging of the effort made by them.

"Don't respond to young people's views/issues with harsh responses"

Considering what children and young people have already said.

"student views are all over the internet/ social media. The department has just to look for them"

Making it someone's job to communicate with students in schools.

"reassurance that your opinion would be listened to"

Influence

How children and young people could know that their views have been acted upon by the department

Providing evidence to children and young people that their views have been listened to.

"If you send some of the things that you have changed to children so they can see they made a difference"

Hearing from the Minister about the changes.

"If it is possible have the Minister talk about what's being changed because more people would tend to listen to her"

Communicating with children and young people via their school.

"send an email to all students on school email – email says how your ideas influence changes"

If the Minister could not tell children and young people about the changes, then perhaps their teachers could tell them.

"the teachers in our school should let us know the information"

Having a clear list of actions and timelines for actions.

"Reports to be issued"

Keeping children and young people informed using social media.

"Tag and use hashtags to catch attention"

What the Expert Group recommends

The expert group made five recommendations to help the Department of Education to improve its work on listening to the views of children and young people when developing department policy.

Five recommendations

That the department builds on its understanding

01

This means that the department trains its staff so that they understand the need to ensure the participation of children and young people and that they understand how best to do so.

That the department develops its processes

02

This means that the department will have ways to support the participation of children and young people.

That the department communicates with children and young people

03

This means that the department communicates regularly with children and young people about what is happening in the department and the ways that children and young people have shaped this.

That the department promotes good practice

04

This means that the department promotes good practice in student participation that is happening internally in the department, in schools and by others involved in education.

That the department holds itself accountable

05

This means that the department develops ways for it to check that it is doing the work that it said it would.

Making It Happen

The Department of Education will make the changes that the expert group advised. We have developed 50 actions that we are going to take over the next two years to do this. We have provided some of these actions below.

That the department builds on its understanding 01

- Staff who work in the department will be told how important it is to listen to the views of children and young people when developing department policy.
- Staff who work in the department will be trained so that they know how best to listen to the views of children and young people.
- The department will set up child and youth advisory groups to help it with its work to listen to the views of children and young people when developing policy.

That the department develops its processes

02

- The department will listen to the views of children and young people and will tell them about the changes that have been made because of their ideas.
- The department will keep a list of schools and other places of education where students want to be involved in sharing their views with the department.
- The department will make sure that children and young people are safe from harm when sharing their views with the department.

That the department communicates with children and young people

03

- The department will send a video message to children and young people so that they know that the department wants to listen to their views when developing policy.
- The department will send this booklet to children and young people so that they can see what the expert group said and what the department is going to do to make the changes advised.
- The department will send a newsletter to children and young people every year to share information with them about how their views have helped to develop policy.

That the department promotes good practice

04

- The department will create a webpage to provide information about the changes that have happened as a result of what children and young people have said.
- The department will tell students, school staff and board of management members that it is important to listen to children and young people when making decisions that affect them.
- The department will provide guidance to schools to support them in helping children and young people to set up and run student councils in their schools.

That the department holds itself accountable

05

- The department will set up a group of staff that will make sure the department makes all these actions happen.
- The department will work with other government departments to make sure that the views of children and young people are listened to.
- The department will make sure that the children and young people who shared their views with us will know the changes that have happened as a result of their ideas or the reasons why they have not.

More information on student participation in the Department of Education can be found at **gov.ie/itstartswithyou**

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