

**National summary sheets on
education system in Europe
and ongoing reforms**

2009 Edition

IRELAND

JUNE 2009

1. Education population and language of instruction

In 2006, 35 % of Ireland's population was aged below 25, and there were 631 715 young people aged 6-16 (the ages wherein education is compulsory). There were approximately 455 000 people in full-time education at first level (4/5 -12/13 years old), 345 000 at second level (12/13 – 17/18 years old) and 145 000 at third level (17/18 – 21/22 years old). The language of instruction depends on whether the school lies in an Irish (*Gaeltacht*) or English-speaking district or provides Irish-medium education in an almost predominantly English-speaking community. In 2006/07 there were 32 155 first level pupils and 8 351 second level pupils receiving their education through the medium of Irish.

2. Administrative control and extent of public-sector funded education

In 2008, approximately 98 % of full-time pupils/students attended public-sector schools and 2 % attended private non-grant-aided schools (provided and controlled by non-government bodies, and receiving none of their finance from the public sector).

Irish schools at the first and second level are, by and large, privately owned but State funded. While the schools remain in private ownership (largely owned by religious communities) and are locally managed (largely by representative boards of management), teachers' salaries and capital/operational costs are almost entirely met by the State. Schools termed as being 'private' in Ireland are those that charge annual fees to students as a condition of enrolment and attendance.

The Education Act (1998) provides a legal and administrative base for the education system at first and second levels. It legislates for an appropriate balance between the interdependent rights and obligations of the child, parents, the teachers, the church, the State and other agencies.

Universities and other higher education institutions are autonomous statutory bodies.

The Department of Education and Science sets down a broad regulatory framework within which schools in receipt of State funding are required to operate. The regulatory framework includes the curriculum to be followed by schools, the governance structures for individual schools and the timeframe within which schools are required to operate. The Department pays salaries directly to teachers, but schools are their legal employers, except in the vocational system where local education committees have a high degree of administrative control in local areas. Aside from the vocational system, grants are paid directly to schools by the Department of Education and Science to meet their day-to-day running costs. Schools largely determine their own enrolment policy, having regard to legislative requirements, they choose the textbooks to be used in the school and they have considerable autonomy in deciding on the teaching methods and assessment methods to be used.

The Inspectorate is responsible for the evaluation of first and second level schools and centres for education in accordance with Section 13 of the Education Act 1998. Its activities can be categorised broadly under four strands: (1) Operating an inspection and evaluation programme, (2) Assessing and advising on the implementation of legislation and Department regulations, (3) Advising schools, teachers and parents on educational provision, and (4) Contributing to and supporting policy development.

Together with the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Department has a role in quality assurance in further and third level education.

3. Pre-primary education

While compulsory schooling doesn't begin until children are 6 years old, 44.7 % of 4 year olds and 100 % of all 5 year olds are enrolled in infant classes in primary schools (Annual Statistical Report 2006/07: Department of Education and Science). The State also provides funding for other early childhood education provision, including targeted interventions such as Early Start for children in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs which was set up in December 2005 is responsible for ensuring that policies across education and care for young children are aligned across different Ministries.

Pre-school services are required to register with the Health Service Executive (HSE) and comply with the 2006 Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations. The services are inspected by the HSE's pre-school inspectorate. Primary schools have to comply with the rules and regulations set out by the Department of Education and Science and their Inspectorate has responsibility for evaluating primary schools.

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, was published in 2006 by the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECDE). CECDE operated between 2002 and 2008 as a body under the aegis of the Department. The principles underlying Síolta can be applied across the range of early childhood care and education provision.

4. Compulsory education

(i) Phases

First level (compulsory education) <i>Primary schools</i>	6-12 years of age
Second level (compulsory education) <i>Community / Comprehensive / Vocational / Voluntary secondary schools</i>	12-16 years of age

(ii) Admission criteria

The Education Welfare Act (2002) provides for compulsory education between the ages of 6 and 16. Most children attending schools recognised under the terms of the Education Act (1998) start school at either 4 or 5 years of age. A child must be at least 4 years of age at the start of the school year (September) to enrol in primary school. When pupils complete primary education (at the age of 12), they are admitted to the junior cycle (for pupils aged 12 to 15 years old) of secondary level schooling. Parents may choose the school. Schooling is free except in privately funded schools.

(iii) Length of the school day/week/year

The school year comprises 183 days (September to the end of June) for primary pupils, and 179 days (September to the end of May) for second level students. Schools open on five days a week. The minimum annual lesson time at primary level is 915 hours. There is no fixed number of lessons which must be taught. Lessons generally last 30 minutes and schools follow general guidelines in regard to the amount of time per week allocated to each aspect of the curriculum. At second level, class periods normally last between 35-45 minutes, and there may be 35-42 classes in a week.

(iv) Class size/student grouping

The overall maximum class size in primary schools by reference to the staffing schedule has been set to 27 in the 2008/09 school year. In certain categories of DEIS schools, the maximum class size can be as low as 15. DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) continues to provide intensive and targeted support for literacy and numeracy in schools with disadvantaged status: it is a government initiative introduced in 2005 to combat educational disadvantage. Primary pupils are generally grouped by age, although there are some mixed-age groups in smaller schools.

Primary classes typically have one teacher for all subjects; second level students have separate subject teachers.

(v) Curricular control and content

The Primary School Curriculum (1999), determined at national level, comprises seven curriculum areas: Language (Irish, English); Mathematics; Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (history, geography, science); Arts Education (visual arts, music and drama); Physical Education; Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Religious Education. It is an integrated curriculum and promotes the child as an active agent in his/her learning.

Students spend three years in the junior cycle of second level schools. They follow the Junior Certificate course the purpose of which is to provide a well-balanced, general education. The core curriculum for the junior cycle (determined at national level) in all second level schools includes Irish, English, Mathematics, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Physical Education should also form part of the curriculum. There are twenty six subjects approved for the junior cycle curriculum of which schools offer a selection to students.

(vi) Assessment, progression and qualifications

There is no formal state examination at the end of primary education. National assessments of the reading and mathematics achievements of Irish primary school pupils are conducted every five years. Since 2006, primary schools are required to administer standardised tests in literacy and numeracy to pupils at two points of the primary school cycle and report the results of these tests to their parents. At second level, the Junior Certificate examination is an externally set and externally assessed state examination taken by students at the end of the three-year junior cycle programme.

Pupils progress from year to year automatically. In very exceptional circumstances, a school may retain a pupil at a grade level for a second year.

Otherwise, assessment is promoted as an intrinsic part of the learning process in primary and post-primary schools where the teacher and the learner can evaluate progress or achievement in the development of a particular skill or in the understanding of a particular area of knowledge, and use this information to inform future teaching and learning. In primary school, teachers are encouraged to use a range of assessment methods including teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests, conferencing and portfolio assessment for gathering information about how well children are learning across the curriculum. Oral assessments in languages and practical assessments in the subjects such as science and geography are becoming a key feature of the assessment process in post-primary schools.

5. Post-compulsory education/upper secondary and post-secondary level

(i) Types of education

Second level education (senior cycle) <i>Community / comprehensive / vocational / Voluntary secondary schools</i> ⁽¹⁾	15/16-17/19 years of age
Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) <i>Community / comprehensive / vocational / voluntary secondary schools</i>	Over 16 years of age

The senior cycle in second level schools is two or three years in duration depending on whether students take the optional Transition Year. During the Transition Year, which is offered in 72 % of schools, a school-designed curriculum is delivered. The emphasis in Transition Year is on personal and social development as well as promoting general, technical and academic skills. Many schools offer work experience programmes as part of Transition Year. During their last two years in second level schools students take a Leaving Certificate programme.

Post Leaving Certificate, (PLC) is a post-secondary education programme of integrated general education, vocational training and work experience for young people and adults who have completed upper second level education or equivalent. It is a one or two year full time course aimed at enhancing employment prospects or progression to third level education. Part-time options at this level are also available under the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) – Launched in 2002, this programme provides opportunities to return to Education for young people and adults who may have left formal education at an early age and is designed to develop skills in line with emerging needs.

(ii) Admission criteria

The vast majority of students automatically progress from the junior cycle to the senior cycle in the same institution. In 2007, 81 % of pupils transferred from Junior to Senior Cycle in public sector second level schools. Admission to PLC is automatic for school leavers. Adults are generally interviewed by the school to assess their suitability for the programme.

(iii) Curricular control and content

There are three separate Leaving Certificate programmes determined at national level: the established Leaving Certificate (LC), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LVA). Students taking the established Leaving Certificate must

⁽¹⁾ Until 1994, some voluntary secondary schools were selective by having entrance examinations for the purpose of screening intake.

study not less than five approved subjects, one of which one must be Irish. Students usually select seven subjects from a range of thirty three subjects approved for the senior cycle curriculum.

PLC courses must be approved by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

(iv) Assessment, progression and qualifications

Teachers administer tests to senior cycle students during the year and students progress automatically in other than exceptional circumstances. External examinations are taken at the end of the senior cycle and students are awarded the Leaving Certificate. The State Examinations Commission is responsible for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level examinations of the Irish state: the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate. The State Examinations Commission is a non-departmental public body under the aegis of the Department of Education and Science. For students following the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, assessment takes place at various stages during the two-year programme. Assessment for the Leaving Certificate is based on written and, where appropriate, oral, aural and practical examinations. The Leaving Certificate is used widely by employers for selection purposes and it is the basis upon which places in third level education are allocated.

Assessments for PLC students are carried out at the end of the year and certification at level 5 and 6 of the National Qualifications Framework is granted by FETAC.

6. Tertiary education

(i) Types of institution

Higher Education in Ireland consists of seven universities (with associated colleges of education), fourteen institutes of technology, and a number of private independent colleges. The universities and institutes of technology are autonomous and self-governing, but are substantially state-funded.

(ii) Access

The minimum academic entry requirements for the majority of third-level courses are determined at individual institution level and are generally based on national examination performance ⁽²⁾.

(iii) Qualifications

Universities, in addition to offering degrees at Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate levels over a full range of disciplines, are involved in robust research programmes, often supported by government and with strong links to business and industry.

The institutes of technology offer programmes in technology, science, engineering and humanities at all levels from Higher Certificate to PhD, as well as providing craft and professional level programmes. These programmes are either awarded by the colleges themselves under government approval or are approved by HETAC, the Higher Education and Training Award Council. In recent years, the institutes have greatly expanded their research portfolios.

Independent colleges offer courses covering a wide spectrum including business programmes; law; humanities; hotel, catering and tourism studies; science and art and design. Many of the programmes offered by these colleges are validated by HETAC and some have links with universities and/or professional associations through which the courses on offer are accredited.

⁽²⁾ Details in relation to minimum academic entry requirements can be found on the Department of Education and Science website at www.education.ie at Home > Students & Trainees > Higher Education > FAQ.

Many of the independent colleges also offer courses leading to the awards of overseas universities or other awarding bodies ⁽³⁾.

7. Special needs

There has been considerable movement towards the development of inclusive practices in Irish education over the last decade. The recommendation that students with special educational needs (SEN) should be educated in mainstream schools has been of particular significance in underpinning the allocation of increased resources for SEN provision to mainstream and special schools; in the development of new funding mechanisms for SEN provision in mainstream schools; and in the large increase in the number of students with assessed SEN in mainstream primary and post-primary schools.

In 1998, the Department of Education and Science introduced the practice of an automatic response to applications for resources for students with SEN. This involved the allocation of resource teaching hours and special needs assistant support for students with SEN in mainstream schools. This system has been refined and revised over time. The current policy of the Department is to secure the maximum possible level of inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, while ensuring that specialist facilities continue to be provided for students whose needs are such that they need to be placed in special schools or in special classes attached to mainstream schools. In implementing this policy, the Department and its associated bodies work with other Government Departments, statutory bodies, voluntary agencies, schools management bodies, third-level institutions and other professional organisations in the management and delivery of education provision for students with SEN.

The Department is committed to the enhancement of services to students with special educational needs and to the improvement of service delivery through the National Council for Special Education. The Department will underpin SEN provision through special needs policy development.

8. Teachers

There isn't a regulatory requirement for staff in day-care centres or playgroups to hold a minimum qualification. The de-facto standard set out in Síolta – the National Quality Framework for early Childhood Education – is at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications). Courses in childcare leading to the minimum standard qualification vary in length from 1 to 2 years. The student requires 8 to 9 modules to obtain the qualification and these modules can be taken on a part-time basis. For courses at Level 5, supervised work experience of four weeks is a usual requirement.

Teachers within the primary system obtain a Bachelor of Education degree after a three- or four-year course in a college of education. Teachers at secondary level usually hold a Bachelor degree in their specialist subject and complete a one-year Higher Diploma in Education.

Primary-level teachers are generalists and secondary-level teachers are subject specialists.

Teachers are employed by the school but are paid by the State and classed as public servants.

The Teaching Council was established on a statutory basis in 2006 to regulate the teaching profession and the professional conduct of teachers. Its broader remit is to establish and promote the maintenance and improvement of standards of:

⁽³⁾ Further details on the courses and awards of these independent colleges can be found on the Department of Education and Science website www.education.ie at Home > Students & Trainees > Internationalisation Register.

- Programmes of teacher education and training
- Teaching, knowledge, skill and competence of teachers in recognised primary and
- Post-primary schools
- Professional conduct of teachers

9. Current reforms and priorities

Education in Ireland is undergoing a continuous programme of reform, at legal, administrative and professional levels. Some examples are:

- Work will commence shortly on the development of a new national strategy for higher education. The strategy will aim to provide a vision for the future development of the sector to support it, through the many roles it plays, in contributing to Ireland's economic and social development in the 21st century. This will take account of the role of higher education in the development and empowerment of individual students as well as its role in the achievement of national policy goals for protecting and growing Ireland's prosperity and ensuring greater social inclusion.
- The Qualifications (Education and Training Act 1999) has been commenced.
- The Education (Welfare) Act 2002 has replaced the previous school attendance legislation and the National Education Welfare Board is implementing new measures to ensure school attendance.
- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is finalising a Curricular Framework for Early Learning which aims to provide all children with appropriately enriching learning opportunities from birth to six years. Within the primary school system, the curriculum is seen as an 8 year programme that includes young children in junior and senior infants.
- The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004 provides a framework for delivery of special education services as well as statutorily underpinning the work of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). The Act outlines the statutory duty of the Minister for Education and Science to set national policy and provide necessary resources. It provides that a child (defined as a person who is not more than 18 years) with special educational needs must be educated in an inclusive setting unless such an arrangement is inconsistent with the best interests of the child or with the effective provision of education for those children with whom the child is to be educated. A significant number of sections of the Act have been commenced, principally those establishing the NCSE and those promoting an inclusive approach to the education of children with special educational needs. While commencement of the remaining sections of the Act has been deferred it is envisaged that these sections will be progressed in due course. Following an eight-year implementation phase, all primary schools are now expected to fully implement the revised curriculum at primary level, which was launched in 1999. The Department of Education and Science Inspectorate and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment have completed reviews of the implementation of six of the eleven curricular areas. There is ongoing provision of additional curriculum materials and supports to enhance the implementation of the curriculum.
- The recently established Primary Professional Development Service will provide a cohesive, responsive support service for primary schools and help them to develop as professional learning communities.

- New arrangements have been put in place to support the assessment and reporting of pupils' progress and achievement in primary schools with effect from 2007
- A pilot project for the introduction of modern continental languages continues in primary schools.
- There is ongoing review/development by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment of the curricular programmes operated at second level.
- The National Educational Psychological Services Agency continues to provide an educational psychological service to schools throughout the country.

The general aim of the reforms is the improvement of the quality of education for children/students at all levels of the system, so that they can continue to contribute to the economic, social and cultural life of the country and can develop to their full potential as persons and participate fully as citizens in society.

Ireland operates a partnership model of educational reform. This means that those most closely affected by the reforms are consulted, whenever possible, when reforms are proposed. The effect of this is that there is ongoing debate and discussion at all levels of the system in regard to educational policies and reforms.

For more detailed information on the education systems in Europe, you may consult the EURYDICE data base, EURYBASE (<http://www.eurydice.org>)