

Reform of the Junior Certificate

The Minister for Education Ruari Quinn has recently announced that he will seek to reform the Junior Certificate Examination by removing the emphasis on a single exam assessed externally and replacing it with more continuous assessments carried out by teachers. This is not the first time such reforms have been mooted. In 1975, the Committee on the Form and Function of the Intermediate Certificate Examination (as the Junior Cert Exam was then called) produced The I.C.E. Report, which recommended reforms strikingly similar to those suggested by the current Minister. The summary of The I.C.E. Report is reproduced below.

Final Report of the Committee on the form and function of the Intermediate Certificate

The Intermediate Certificate Examination Report builds on the Committee's position as stated in its Interim Report, on the responses of the public to that report, and on the study and research done in the meantime. The Committee sees the present Intermediate Certificate Examination as serving some useful purposes, which are however outweighed by its drawbacks. It offers norms of academic achievement to teachers and pupils; it carries out an assessment which would have to be done by teachers in any case; it is impartial in its marking, and it motivates to work.

On the other hand it proposes uniform targets to pupils of a great diversity of ability and aspiration, for many of whom it is not suitable. Its certificates are of little practical use to the majority of successful candidates, and most of those that leave school early and need a certificate, fail to win one. It samples a narrow range of skills, and by leaving some important skills unrewarded, it is effectively a disincentive to their cultivation. It is a poor predictor of Senior Cycle schooling, and its reliability of marking and speed of results could be improved considerably. It discourages innovation and curriculum development, and creates a sharp discontinuity with the integrated studies of the new Primary Curriculum. It was designed for a generation of teachers with inadequate training, and by keeping the responsibility for curricula and assessment in central control, it discourages teacher development and initiative, and shifts responsibility for assessment of pupils from a teacher who knows the pupil, to central markers who do not.

The Committee's proposals could be summarised in two statements. Some form of nation-wide assessment at 15+ is needed for the sake of:

- a) feedback of norms to pupils, teachers and parents;
- b) impartiality of an accepted sort;
- c) guidance for further studies;
- d) motivation to learning.

But assessments need be:

- a) more varied in its modes than the Intermediate Certificate Examination, so as to include assessments of oral, practical and project work, and to relate the mode of assessment to the objectives of the course that preceded it;
- b) wider in its scope, reaching both higher and lower ranges of ability than the Intermediate Certificate Examination grades;
- c) broader in its objects, assessing both cognitive and non-cognitive factors;
- d) more flexible, allowing for various forms of curriculum development and innovative;
- e) frequent, occurring on more than a single occasion in Junior Cycle;
- f) school-based, involving the teachers of students concerned.

The Committee's proposals are for a system of school-based assessment monitored by a central body, which would take responsibility for all aspects of assessing the curriculum, helping teachers to clarify educational objectives, providing external tests, and opportunities for internal (school-based) assessments, and training teachers in the techniques and principals of assessment and curriculum development. All school-leaders would be given a certificate by the school, with information on all assessment, whether by externally set tests or administered by the school itself. The monitoring, or moderating, of school-based assessment would be effected by collaboration between schools in small groupings. In this way the need for public accreditation of certificates could be balanced by the teachers' need for freedom to develop their own courses and assessments to match the diverse requirements of their pupils. The Committee proposes ways of effecting a smooth transition from the present system to one of school-based assessment.