



Senior Cycle Redevelopment

The Challenges Facing
School Leadership

A JMB Research Report
April 2025

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JMB plays a central role in ensuring that the perspective of our school leaders is brought to bear on all emerging education policy developments. This advocacy and collaborative work needs to reflect the realities faced by school leaders across our sector. Senior cycle redevelopment is a major focus for our schools and our organisation at present. The changes already in place, and all future developments, are founded on the NCCA's *Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report (2022)*.

In seeking the perspectives of our school leaders on this major national undertaking, this survey was framed around the central provisions of the report and how these changes can be implemented in our schools. 97 school leaders completed the survey, representing 94 of our 377 JMB schools (25%), making it a very representative sample covering all geographical areas, school sizes and type (co-educational and single-sex). I am very grateful to these respondents who, based on the richness of the responses, engaged in a very meaningful way.

It is essential that that JMB brings the authentic voice of our school leaders to the table across every aspect of senior cycle redevelopment. This report will go along way towards achieving that aim.

Deirdre Matthews,
JMB – General Secretary.

Purpose/Vision of Senior Cycle Education

The NCCA's 'Senior Cycle Review – Advisory Report (2022)' states that the review of senior cycle 'devoted significant time to exploring the philosophical questions relating to the purpose of education generally and senior cycle education specifically' (p. 20).

This period of reflection led to the identification of how the educational experience at senior cycle should:

- continue to educate the whole person
- help every student to become more enriched, engaged and competent, as they further develop their knowledge, skills, values and dispositions in an integrated way
- serve collective as well as individual purposes in schools and other educational settings and in the wider society
- help students to access diverse futures, by providing firm foundations for transition to further, adult and higher education, apprenticeships, traineeships and employment; and participation in civic society and adult life.

School leaders in JMB schools were asked to rank these in order of priority. Given the educational tradition of schools within the JMB family, it is not surprising that the first two of these were given the highest priority by the respondents. These focus most explicitly and directly on the personhood of each student and identify a pathway to personal flourishing, regardless of the uncertainty of their futures.

	First priority	Second priority
<i>help every student to become more enriched, engaged and competent...</i>	43%	35%
<i>continue to educate the whole person</i>	31%	33%
<i>help students to access diverse futures...</i>	22%	28%
<i>serve collective as well as individual purposes...</i>	5%	3%

Respondents were invited to consider 'what was missing' from the aims above. Many respondents highlighted the importance of developing critical thinking, emotional resilience, creativity, and a lifelong love of learning; qualities central to personal flourishing. Wellbeing and mental health emerged as recurring themes, underscoring a shared commitment to nurturing each student's holistic development. Some responses also very explicitly emphasised moral education, civic engagement, and contribution to the common good, reflecting the values-based tradition of JMB schools.

The NCCA vision for Senior Cycle also seems to cohere with the vision of JMB schools. For example, respondents respond favourable to this vision statement: *'senior cycle education cultivates learning and contributes to human flourishing. It recognises the whole person, contributing to students' growth and maturity, to their continuing intellectual, social and personal development and their overall health and wellbeing'.*

63% stated that this vision aligns with their school's mission statement/charter, while 31% said that it did so 'to a large extent'.

In terms of the guiding principles for a redeveloped senior cycle, the top four, as ranked by the respondents were (in order):

1. **Learning to learn, learning for life** - students develop greater independence in, and understanding of, how they learn; deepen their capacity to meet the challenges of life within and beyond school; and have second-chance opportunities for learning and assessment.
2. **Wellbeing and relationships** - students' experiences and relationships in school and in the wider society contribute directly to their overall wellbeing and to their holistic development. Students' experiences throughout senior cycle are supported in the relationships students have with teachers, peers, parents and other significant adults.
3. **Challenge, engagement and creativity** - students experience a challenging, engaging and high-quality education, with opportunities for new and deep learning and for critical, creative and innovative thinking.
4. **Inclusive education and diversity** - the educational experience in senior cycle is inclusive of every student, valuing and respecting diversity and the contribution each student can make. Every student has enjoyable experiences in and meaningful outcomes from senior cycle education.

Similar to the earlier question, it would seem that the principles that speak directly of the experience of each and every student, their innate value and their pathway to personal flourishing seem to resonate most with respondents. The section below, and the identified needs in terms of resourcing, reinforce this point also. Ultimately this vision of education is relational. It is further proposed that senior leaders are essential to realising this vision. It is senior leaders who ultimately will be required to foster collaboration between our teachers, to maintain a culture that supports positive relationships between teachers and students and among peers within our learning communities. It is senior and system leaders that are needed to steer the conversations to go beyond logistics and towards a sense of shared purpose. This requires a deeper engagement.

Therefore, it is no surprise that **94% of respondents stated that senior school leaders would be primarily responsible for 'ensuring that the vision of senior cycle redevelopment is successfully realised through the process of change.'**

A key component of the vision for senior cycle redevelopment is the statement that 'knowledge, skills, values and dispositions are interconnected'. While the vision of senior cycle seems to align with the educational vision of our school leaders, the respondents were less convinced that the vision is being fully realised in the senior cycle materials available to them (such as curriculum specifications, background papers, Oide training, TY Programme Statement, L1/L2 learning modules etc.). When asked 'to what extent do you expect new specifications to improve on previous syllabuses/programmes', 16% said 'to a large extent' while 68% said 'somewhat'. 15 % saw either no improvement or a disimprovement.

Enabling the Realisation of the Vision for Senior Cycle

The respondents gave very detailed and at times lengthy responses to the question which asked them to indicate what resources would be required to realise the vision of Senior Cycle. This reflects the respondents' understanding that change, and the development of student experience, requires real and tangible changes to the resourcing of our schools. The most frequently cited needs are summarised as follows:

Increased Leadership Capacity:

“Increased allocation of DP posts to schools. Senior management do not have adequate time to meaningfully engage with embedding Senior Cycle reform.”

The need for increased senior leadership resources is a recurring and pressing theme in the feedback from respondents. **(88% of respondents said they would need additional senior leadership capacity).** Many expressed that current senior leadership teams, are stretched too thin to effectively manage the increased workload associated with the senior cycle reform. Senior leaders, including principals and deputy principals, are already burdened with a range of responsibilities, from pastoral care to curriculum delivery, and they are finding it increasingly difficult to devote the necessary time and attention to driving change. As one respondent stated, **“our school of 650 students, with a team of 1 DP and 1 P, cannot possibly realise these ambitions.”**

Respondents advocated for additional senior leadership posts, such as a second deputy principal, to ensure that schools have the capacity to manage both academic and pastoral demands, alongside the increased requirements for the senior cycle. Senior leadership teams are tasked with overseeing the implementation of new assessment models, ensuring teacher professional development, and maintaining school culture and student wellbeing; all while navigating the logistical complexities of the reform.

Improved Pupil/Teacher Ratio:

“In a school our size we simply cannot expand the curriculum beyond what we currently have. Providing more resources in the form of teacher allocation to schools will allow schools to achieve the above goal.”

A frequent concern among respondents is the need for an increased teacher allocation to enable schools to meet the diverse needs of senior cycle students. Respondents highlighted that larger class sizes and the challenge of offering a broad curriculum, especially in smaller schools, hinder their ability to effectively implement the new senior cycle.

Professional Development and Training for Teachers:

“A broad range of professional development opportunities are necessary for teachers to adapt to the new senior cycle model, particularly around student-centred learning, inclusion, and interdisciplinary teaching.”

Several responses highlighted the need for extensive Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) for teachers to adapt to new methods of teaching, assessment, and digital integration. Training was identified as crucial for the success of the reforms. Senior leadership teams have a central role in ensuring that staff receive the necessary support and training. Ongoing, targeted training was described as necessary for equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge to manage the complexities of the new assessment models and the diverse needs of students, ultimately supporting school leaders in their strategic vision.

As schools undergo significant changes with the senior cycle reform, the need for structured time for teachers to plan, collaborate, and receive training is increasingly critical. One respondent emphasised that *“more training for teachers to enhance pedagogical performance, increased allocation to allow for time for planning and review”* was necessary to ensure the success of the new initiatives.

IT Infrastructure and Technology Support:

“IT infrastructure in schools will need big investment.”

A significant number of responses identified the need for enhanced **IT resources** to support the new assessment methods and the integration of technology into the curriculum. This was a consistent concern across many respondents. This includes providing teachers with updated devices and ensuring schools have the technology to deliver an effective curriculum. Senior leadership teams are already managing complex school-wide reforms, and without adequate IT resources and support, the new senior cycle initiatives, such as digital portfolios and project-based assessments, cannot be implemented successfully. Many feel that robust IT infrastructure is essential not only for delivering the curriculum but also for easing the burden on senior leadership in managing the administrative and assessment aspects of the reform.

Guidance and Pastoral Support for Students:

“Guidance counsellors will be integral to achieving this vision. Current provision will need to increase. All schools should have a chaplain to support the pastoral and spiritual needs of students, particularly in bereavement, and the many other life-changing experiences.”

Many respondents mentioned the increasing importance of **guidance counsellors** and **mental health support** in schools. Given the impact of changes to assessment (like AACs) and the overall mental health challenges students face, this was frequently brought up.

Clear and Consistent Assessment Guidelines and Support:

“Clear school policies which are linked to the SEC requirements, and clear guidelines on how AI is to be used.”

This was a recurring theme in responses about the challenges schools face in managing new forms of assessment, particularly with the introduction of **AACs** and the need for **clear timelines and guidelines**. Respondents expressed frustration with the lack of consistency and clear direction from regulatory bodies like the SEC.

Senior Cycle – Teaching, Learning, Assessment, and Reporting

According to the NCCA report, 'quality teaching, learning, assessment and reporting approaches in senior cycle and an inclusive school culture profoundly impact on students' holistic development and wellbeing' (p. 30).

This survey identified the leadership tasks required to ensure that development of robust practices in schools to achieve this aim. These tasks were listed as below. For each task, respondents were asked to identify 'who (principal, senior leadership team (SLT), assistant principal, subject department or teaching staff) is **most** suited to deal with [each] (assuming an appropriate level of resourcing)'.

Lead a process to ensure robust teacher collaboration

Organise agendas and collate feedback from collaborative meetings

Lead curriculum/timetable review

Strategically plan the deployment of school resources to meet the needs of senior cycle

Ensure that a thorough TY review has taken place, working towards alignment with the national TY programme statement

Arrange teacher collaboration and stakeholder feedback to inform the TY review

Lead the process of introducing SPHE/RSE to senior cycle and managing the resourcing and timetable review resulting from same

Ensure there is an adequate availability of trained and motivated teachers for senior cycle SPHE/RSE

Lead and manage to maximise staff morale throughout the change process

Disseminate relevant information to parents and students

Lead the school community to promote equity and integrity in the context of a new senior cycle

Manage the ethical integration of Generative A.I. into school policies and practices

The table below shows the percentage of respondents indicating who they felt were most suited to lead in each of the listed areas.

Task	SLT	Principal	APs	Subject Dept.	Teachers
Lead process for robust teacher collaboration	55.3%	28.7%	3.2%	7.4%	5.3%
Organise agendas & collate feedback from meetings	44.2%	8.4%	20%	24.2%	3.2%
Lead curriculum/timetable review	57.3%	38.5%	2.1%	0%	2.1%
Plan deployment of school resources for Senior Cycle	47.9%	49%	1%	2.1%	0%
Ensure thorough TY review aligned with national programme	51.6%	11.6%	30.5%	4.2%	2.1%
Arrange teacher collaboration and stakeholder feedback for TY	35.4%	12.5%	43.8%	7.3%	1%
Lead the process of introducing SPHE/RSE to Senior Cycle and manage resourcing	54.3%	22.3%	9.6%	10.6%	3.2%
Ensure availability of trained & motivated SPHE/RSE teachers	47.9%	47.9%	0%	4.2%	0%
Maximise staff morale during change process	51%	49%	0%	0%	0%
Disseminate information to parents and students	56.3%	22.9%	16.7%	3.1%	1%
Promote equity and integrity in new Senior Cycle	46.3%	47.4%	1.1%	0%	5.3%
Manage ethical integration of Generative AI in policies	54.7%	16.8%	17.9%	3.2%	7.4%

The JMB Pre-Budget Submission 2026 states:

Our contention is that in light of evolving policy around inclusion and curriculum, the required systems-level knowledge, delegated authority, year-round availability, and agency within schools can best be mediated at deputy principal level, and not as an inadequate increase in the allocation of posts of responsibility.

This contention is very much backed up by the evidence presented in the table above.

Averaging each of the columns we find that the respondents identify the agents of change in schools as follows:

SLT	Principal	APs	Subject Dept.	Teachers
50.18%	29.58%	12.16%	5.53%	2.55%

An optimistic reading of these data shows the positive disposition of our school leaders towards the ability of our deputy principals to lead change. However, it is concerning that assistant principals were not identified strongly in that regard. While the survey did not elicit the reasons for this, it is likely that lack of 'year-round availability' and the absence of a time allowance are the key reasons. This contention is perhaps supported by the fact that the average percentage for assistant principals was inflated by high scores for T.Y. related leadership roles. This is likely to be as a result of the time-allowance given to programme coordinators, suggesting that there is a return on this investment of resources.

As a follow-up, respondents were invited to free-type additional resources required. The following themes emerged and are presented here in order of frequency of mentions (including sample quotations):

1. Staffing (APs, DPs, SLT, Guidance, Leadership)

“Support in terms of extra deputy principal allocations... HSCL teachers would be a brilliant support in all schools, not just DEIS contexts.”

“Additional members of senior leadership team, even on part time basis, to co-ordinate the implementation of senior cycle.”

“Full DP hours; full Guidance Teacher allocation; dedicated planning time...”

“Staffing (both leadership & teaching); time; training/CPD.”

“Extra AP1 and AP2 posts to support senior leadership... having smaller DEIS schools with 0.5 of a DP is also unrealistic in delivering all the change effectively.”

2. Time Allocation

“Time, Time and more Time.”

“Time for me to do all that I am required to do... need time off their timetable but I can't get subs.”

“Continuous good quality CPD. Time to embed practices.”

“Training, CPD and meeting times need structured timetabled hours.”

“Additional time is needed to do this. There is never enough time allocated...”

3. ICT & Infrastructure

- “IT resources will be paramount for completion of AACs and assessing students appropriately.”
- “The management information systems required to collect and store data... are expensive to maintain.”
- “Yearly ICT grant... support on artificial intelligence and its implication on education.”
- “All students to use devices.”
- “Enhanced IT grant which schools can rely on.”

4. CPD and Training

- “Training in AI for teachers.”
- “Oide teacher training, re-focus away from assessment.”
- “CPD at whole school level and at subject department level.”
- “Additional Teacher Professional Learning – the syllabus, the learning outcomes...”
- “CPD for APs to grow their capacity to lead and monitor these changes...”

5. Administrative Support

- “Extra admin staff.”
- “A PA role would be good to deal with the amount of paperwork. A bursar would be an idea.”
- “Another secretary in the school or Deputy Principal would help greatly.”
- “Additional secretarial staff and IT technician grants...”
- “Administration support. Increase allocation of secretaries.”

6. Assessment Pressures

“Assessment Tasks are increasingly putting load on roster... LC PE requires a large amount of cover...”

“Structures and time for peer moderation to ensure fairness and consistency in teacher-based assessments.”

“The current SEC Portal is cumbersome for uploading AACs.”

“Increased project load will be a change for a lot of teachers and it will all end up on the principal's desk.”

7. AI Integration

“Structures to help schools embrace AI in teaching.”

“Training on the SPHE/RSE framework, digital tools and platforms, integrating AI responsibly...”

“Support on artificial intelligence and its implication on education.”

“As a Principal, having to sign off on exam components that may have been generated by AI is not my remit.”

Promoting Teacher Collaboration

As mentioned above, promoting teacher collaboration is a key component of realising the vision of senior cycle redevelopment, and in particular with regards to teaching, learning, assessment and reporting. Accordingly, respondents were asked to identify to what extent each of a suggested list of measures would help to achieve this. The responses are represented in the table below:

Enabling Measure	To a large extent	Somewhat	Not at all
Additional planning time	78.5%	21.1%	3.2%
Formal subject coordinator posts	70.5%	25.3%	4.2%
Teacher professional time	49.5%	33.7%	16.8%
Enhanced allocation of deputy principal posts	83.3%	14.6%	2.1%
Additional posts of responsibility	49%	36.5%	14.6%

Again, the respondents provide **evidence of the agency of deputy principals and their capacity to deliver change**. Respondents also demonstrate the importance of planning time to support collaborative planning. It is interesting that respondents **strongly support formal subject coordinator posts as a means**

to support collaborative planning. It is also interesting to contrast this with the perceived impact of additional posts of responsibility, the latter being a much more widely discussed resource.

Teaching, Learning, Assessment & Reporting – Further Comments

Respondents were invited to free-type further comments they had in this area. Their responses are grouped thematically below (with sample quotes) reflecting the frequency of references to the various themes.

1. Staffing & Leadership Capacity

“Increased teacher allocation, increased numbers of APs and clear guidelines on the use of AI are essential.”

“A huge undertaking for schools without supports. SLT already overloaded.”

“The burden on the Principal is huge, unmanageable... Assistant principals and an extra DP managing all of this along with teacher manager hours are crucial for success.”

“While additional posts of responsibility can help distribute leadership... an additional DP is significantly more valuable.”

“More Programme co-ordinator roles as opposed to posts of responsibility.”

2. Time Allocation & Workload

“Time Time and more Time.”

“This is a lot of extra work for subject teachers... more professional time allocated along with more time for department meetings will be vital.”

“It is proving impossible to implement all initiatives without additional supports in the form of personnel and time for planning.”

“Teacher professional time is a class off and such a valuable waste.”

3. CPD & Training

“No adequate CPD for P/DPs from Oide for all of the huge change.”

“The quality of in-service training has been inconsistent. In-school days feel more like compliance exercises...”

“Professional learning communities extend support beyond individual schools.”

“High quality CPD.”

4. Administrative Burden

“The huge and ever-growing admin burden on school leaders prevents us from being leaders of learning.”

“We need one admin. person to oversee dates, in-service days and deadlines...”

“Additional administration assistance to take Principals out of Building Works and Summer Works, Emergency Works...”

5. ICT & Digital Infrastructure

“Availability and access to ICT resources... additional computer rooms and guaranteed, yearly ICT funding would be necessary.”

“I would be concerned about issuing a blanket purchase of devices for senior cycle for some families.”

“Generative AI has fundamentally changed how students access and produce knowledge... no clear national guidelines on the ethical use of AI.”

6. Assessment Pressure (AACs, SEC, Equity)

“Student wellbeing affected by multiple AACs... staff wellbeing affected as they are now responsible for completion of AAC.”

“Greater alignment between SEC and the reality of what it is like to prepare students for practical assessments!”

“There has been no robust piloting of these changes... no longitudinal data exists to show how AACs impact teaching and learning, or whether they improve student outcomes or wellbeing. No analysis on how these new assessment demands might reduce student participation in sport, arts, music or trips.”

“Plagiarism and use of AI as well as students being assisted by others... will lead to problems.”

“The proposed changes... are being positioned as a means to reduce stress... this narrative is unconvincing.”

7. Clarity & Communication

“Changes are effectively communicated to parents by either the DES or Oide... a poster should be developed that will streamline the process.”

“There is a complete lack of clarity about how Reasonable Accommodations will apply to AACs.”

“There is a growing lack of confidence in both agencies [NCCA and SEC] due to a perceived absence of consultation, transparency, and clarity.”

Realising the vision for senior cycle - Pathways and Flexibility

In March 2022, the NCCA published *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report*. This report identified the Council's vision for the redevelopment of senior cycle, focusing on the theme of 'Equity and Excellence for All'. The report focuses on three aspects of senior cycle education: pathways and flexibility, curriculum, and assessment.

In relation to senior cycle pathways, some progress has been made, namely:

- The continuation of Level 1 and Level 2 programmes into senior cycle
- The availability of LCVP without subject restrictions
- New subjects
- The availability of LCE Mathematics and Modern Foreign Languages to LCA students

In most jurisdictions, upper secondary education focuses on preparing students for their future progression pathways in further/training education, training and/or employment. Students are often offered a greater level of choice, flexibility and specialism. Ireland has a largely homogenous system, and in the context of the NCCA report, a review of senior cycle pathways (including the impact of our college entry system) is underway.

This section considers the major aspects of senior cycle education:

- Pathways and flexibility
- Curriculum components
- Assessment, reporting and transitions to further, adult and higher education, apprenticeships, traineeships and employment
- Participation in civic society and adult life

Pathways

The review established that a senior cycle for all students which offers a range of different learning pathways could involve, for example:

- *reducing the ring-fencing of existing programmes*
- *combining the most effective elements of existing programmes into a redeveloped senior cycle for all, with multiple pathways and combinations available for students and schools*
- *scope the provision of further options in the areas of technical, vocational, creative and professional learning*
- *providing follow-on learning for students who complete Level One and Level Two Learning Programmes in junior cycle*
- *developing the range of off-site learning opportunities currently in use and those with potential for further expansion*
- *exploring and developing the potential of online learning opportunities.*

Respondents were asked to identify one or two of these possibilities that would present the greatest challenge for their schools in its current context. The number of times each possibility was mentioned is outlined below. The quotes from the surveys give an excellent insight into the practical challenges with each possibility.

1. Providing follow-on learning for students who complete Level One and Level Two Learning Programmes

Mentions: 26

Key Quotes:

- *"LCA would not be an appropriate follow-on... [some of] these students are non-verbal so would not be able to engage with the content."*
- *"We do not yet have a structured post-junior cycle pathway... this would require significant investment in staffing, curriculum, and planning."*
- *"Lack of staff to deliver and how to coordinate and manage this is problematic."*
- *"What will be provided for them at senior cycle? The allocation for special classes needs to be increased."*

2. Developing the range of off-site learning opportunities

Mentions: 20

Key Quotes:

- *"Coordinating transport, supervision, and curriculum coverage... would be complex and resource-intensive."*
- *"Fewer local industries or partners in rural areas make this even harder."*
- *"Who will do this? We don't have a full allocation of Guidance."*
- *"Providing off-site learning opportunities puts extra strain on an already overburdened S&S system."*

3. Scoping the provision of further options in technical, vocational, creative, and professional learning

Mentions: 19

Key Quotes:

- *"Significant challenges in teacher recruitment, especially outside major urban centres."*
- *"Currently, we do not have the teacher allocation to provide further options."*
- *"We would like to investigate these routes, but funding/facilities are lacking."*
- *"Lack of specialist rooms is a major barrier."*

4. Combining the most effective elements of existing programmes

Mentions: 15

Key Quotes:

- *"A great idea but the staffing allocation is not there to realise this aim."*
- *"This would be challenging from a timetabling perspective."*
- *"It would require weeks of work in planning, implementing, reviewing, and moderating."*
- *"Leadership time is already stretched with other initiatives."*

5. Exploring and developing the potential of online learning opportunities

Mentions: 14

Key Quotes:

- *"I.T. facilities are very bad, and students largely do not have their own devices."*
- *"Teachers do not have confidence in digital pedagogy – some even feel fear."*
- *"Where is our digital grant?"*
- *"Access and equity are major concerns – especially after COVID."*

6. Reducing the ring-fencing of existing programmes

Mentions: 9

Key Quotes:

- *"Reducing ring-fencing will irritate teachers and further tighten timetables."*
- *"Very difficult for small schools to offer variety with current allocation."*
- *"Timetabling is a real concern to facilitate overlap."*

Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes

It is perhaps no surprise that the challenge of providing follow-on learning for students who complete Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes received the highest number of mentions above. Many of the respondents' schools had already travelled part of the journey in relation to introducing these programmes and had provided leadership to change cultural mindsets while attempting to overcome practical issues.

40% of respondents' schools were providing L1/L2 LPs at Junior Cycle only while 10% were offering the programmes at both Junior and Senior Cycle. 18% were planning to introduce the programmes at Senior Cycle, while 21% of schools had no plans to introduce L1/L2 plans at any level in the next couple of years.

Those who had done so, clearly felt a frustration regarding their inability to provide a meaningful senior cycle follow-on for their students. For example:

“Providing follow-on learning for students who complete Level One and Level Two Learning Programmes presents a major challenge for our school. At present, **we lack both the structure and resources to offer meaningful senior cycle pathways for these learners**. While we are committed to inclusive education, the current system doesn't support the progression of students with more complex needs.”

“What's missing is a properly designed, resourced, and recognised pathway that caters to these students' needs beyond Junior Cycle. We would need **dedicated staff training, increased allocation for coordination, specialist facilities, and potentially support from external agencies**. Without that, schools are left to try [to] 'fit' these learners into structures that were never designed for them. [This] risks both exclusion and disengagement.”

It is clear from the responses, that strong senior leadership within our schools will be required to deliver such pathways should they emerge. As one respondent put it:

“Developing bespoke programmes that are both accessible and meaningful for these students, **while maintaining integration with the wider school community, would involve careful planning, CPD for staff, and collaboration with external agencies.**”

Transition Year

The Transition Year programme statement identifies the programme as being a key component in the broader vision for senior cycle pathways. It states:

TY offers time, space and autonomy to create enjoyable and meaningful educational experiences that support students in senior cycle. It can be a bridge to opening up a broader range of possibilities and pathways. The programme enables young people to develop a greater capacity to respond to uncertainty, manage complexity, nurture personal interests and become agents of positive, ethical change in society.

Respondents' schools had already engaged strongly with the programme statement with 34% already having their revised programme already in place, and another 59% on track to have the new programme commencing in September 2025.

20% of respondents said that they found the programme statement 'extremely helpful' and 57% found it 'somewhat helpful' when reviewing their TY programme.

Transition Year – Limiting Factors

Respondents were asked to indicate what were the three greatest limiting factors hindering the achievement of the intended outcomes of their school's TY provision.

1. Staffing and Teacher Allocation

The most commonly cited challenge was insufficient staffing, both in terms of overall numbers and teacher availability for TY-specific modules.

“Availability of teachers, especially subjects such as technical subjects, home economics, languages for modular elements.”

“Teacher allocation is too low.”

Several respondents highlighted the difficulty of maintaining a flexible TY programme while also meeting the demands of the core curriculum and exam years.

“Balancing act between TY and allocating teaching resources to provide adequate subject provision.”

2. Funding and Financial Constraints

Schools repeatedly mentioned the pressure of trying to fund a varied TY programme, particularly in DEIS schools or schools with rising numbers.

“Cost, cost, cost.”

“We need a higher TY grant.”

“I pay 43K out on insurance each year... I can't charge parents for everything.”

The cost of activities, transport, and materials, and the limited ability to charge parents, especially in disadvantaged communities, make it hard to deliver what TY aims to offer.

3. Time Allocation and Timetabling

There was widespread concern about reduced time for TY subject sampling and the difficulty of fitting TY into already packed school timetables.

“Time – the limit of time placed on core subjects.”

“Timetabling and staffing constraints... Transition Year requires flexibility, creativity.”

“Time for teachers to plan... time for the coordinator to implement the programme.”

4. Facilities and Infrastructure

Many schools, especially those in temporary accommodation or with older buildings, lack the physical resources to support the kind of experiential learning TY is built on.

“ We have been in temporary accommodation for 9 years.”

“ We do not have modern science facilities or a purpose-built PE space.”

“ Lack of good quality ICT.”

5. Work Experience and External Partnerships

Securing high-quality, meaningful work experience is increasingly challenging due to external pressures such as insurance, the capacity of local businesses, and geography.

“ Securing quality work experience placements is increasingly difficult... many local businesses [are] already stretched.”

“ Cost of transport.”

“ Managing work experience within the constraints I have mentioned.”

6. Parental and Student Perceptions

Parental concern about the academic value of TY can influence participation and programme design.

“ Parents do not want their children getting out of the habit of a structured regime.”

“ Parental and student perception of the TY programme... finance and location.”

7. Teacher Buy-In and Professional Development

Getting all staff to embrace the ethos of TY and contribute to its delivery was cited as a challenge.

“ Teacher apathy.”

“ Lack of interest from staff. Lack of a coordinator.”

“ Teachers just want to teach their subjects and not sustainability, community involvement or anything they have to make up.”

8. Curriculum Restrictions and Departmental Policy

Several respondents raised issues with inflexible national guidelines and over-prescription from the Department of Education.

“We are being micro-managed by circulars.”

“Over-specification... undermines the capacity of schools to respond creatively and flexibly.”

“Rules about subject sampling... inability to fund desirable workshops.”

Theme	Frequency	Sample Quotes
Staffing and Teacher Allocation	43	<i>“Teacher allocation is too low.”</i> <i>“Availability of teachers... especially for technical subjects.”</i>
Funding and Financial Constraints	41	<i>“Cost, cost, cost.”</i> <i>“We need a higher TY grant.”</i>
Time Constraints (Planning, Contact Time)	31	<i>“Time – the limit of time placed on core subjects.”</i> <i>“Time for the coordinator to implement the programme.”</i>
Timetabling and Scheduling Difficulties	27	<i>“Timetabling constraints... hard to fit everything in.”</i> <i>“Modules need specific time allocations.”</i>
Facilities and Infrastructure	16	<i>“We have been in temporary accommodation for 9 years.”</i> <i>“Lack of science and PE facilities.”</i>
Parental and Student Perception	12	<i>“Parents want academic structure.”</i> <i>“Student buy-in is difficult.”</i>
Work Experience Challenges	12	<i>“Securing quality placements is difficult.”</i> <i>“Cost of transport.”</i>
Teacher Engagement / Buy-in	11	<i>“Teacher apathy.”</i> <i>“Lack of staff interest in TY.”</i>
Curriculum and Departmental Guidelines	10	<i>“We are being micro-managed by circulars.”</i> <i>“Over-specification undermines creativity.”</i>
Resources (e.g. ICT, equipment)	9	<i>“Lack of good quality ICT.”</i> <i>“Lack of materials for modules.”</i>
Programme Coordination and Oversight	8	<i>“Coordinator also running LCA – it’s a lot.”</i> <i>“No dedicated time to oversee TY.”</i>
Attendance / Absenteeism	4	<i>“Attendance is an issue... parents arrange extra work experience.”</i>
Policy: Non-compulsory Status / Structure	4	<i>“TY not mandatory... impacts uptake and planning.”</i>
Local Factors (e.g. rural access, competition)	4	<i>“Four schools in one rural town... few volunteering options.”</i> <i>“Fee-charging schools distort the TY landscape.”</i>

An Integrated Senior Cycle

As mentioned above, small gains have already been made with the removal of subject groupings for LCVP and by allowing LCA students to study Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) Mathematics and Modern Foreign Languages (MFL).

39% of our respondents reported that there had been an increased uptake of LCVP since the subject groupings were removed. Only 10% and 5% reported that their schools were facilitating LCA students to study Mathematics and MFL respectively.

Flexible Pathways

Respondents were asked the following question

The goal of the next phase of senior cycle redevelopment is to develop proposals for curriculum pathways that will:

- *enhance flexibility for all students*
- *be inclusive*
- *offer clear and coherent student-centred pathways that provide a greater variety of curricular choice to meet the talents, interests, needs and aspirations of all students*
- *retain the benefits of the existing programmes i.e. the broadness and rigour of LCE, credit accumulation and assessment modalities of LCA etc.*
- *offer parity of esteem - affirming the talents and abilities of all students*
- *be implementable in our school*
- *promote and support life-long learning*
- *have the capacity to respond to future curricular needs and priorities*

*If you brought this list to your **Teaching Staff**, which one or two areas do you think each would prioritise?*

The following table indicates the responses given.

Curriculum Pathway Goals – Perceived Teachers' Priorities	Frequency
<i>Retain the benefits of the existing programmes i.e. the broadness and rigour of LCE, credit accumulation and assessment modalities of LCA etc.</i>	33
<i>Be implementable in our school</i>	29
<i>Offer clear and coherent student-centred pathways that provide a greater variety of curricular choice to meet the talents, interests, needs and aspirations of all students</i>	22
<i>Offer parity of esteem – affirming the talents and abilities of all students</i>	11
<i>Promote and support life-long learning</i>	11
<i>Be inclusive</i>	9
<i>Have the capacity to respond to future curricular needs and priorities</i>	8
<i>Enhance flexibility for all students</i>	6

Respondents were then asked what areas they thought their students' **parents** would prioritise. The table below summarises their responses.

Curriculum Pathway Goals – Perceived Parents' Priorities	Frequency
<i>Enhance flexibility for all students</i>	38
<i>Offer clear and coherent student-centred pathways that provide a greater variety of curricular choice to meet the talents, interests, needs and aspirations of all students</i>	27
<i>Curricular choice</i>	16
<i>Promote and support lifelong learning</i>	10
<i>Offer parity of esteem - affirming the talents and abilities of all students</i>	10
<i>Be inclusive</i>	8
<i>Have the capacity to respond to future curricular needs and priorities</i>	5
<i>Retain the benefits of the existing programmes i.e. the broadness and rigour of LCE, credit accumulation and assessment modalities of LCA etc.</i>	4
<i>No idea / N/A</i>	4
<i>Flexibility and future needs</i>	1
<i>Offer clear and coherent student-centred pathways + inclusivity</i>	1

Finally, respondents were asked what they felt their schools' **student councils** would prioritise, and again the responses are reflected in the frequency table below.

Curriculum Pathway Goal – Perceived Student Council Priorities	Frequency
<i>Offer clear and coherent student-centred pathways that provide a greater variety of curricular choice to meet the talents, interests, needs and aspirations of all students</i>	58
<i>Enhance flexibility for all students</i>	51
<i>Offer parity of esteem – affirming the talents and abilities of all students</i>	30
<i>Retain the benefits of the existing programmes i.e. the broadness and rigour of LCE, credit accumulation and assessment modalities of LCA etc.</i>	22
<i>Be inclusive</i>	18
<i>Promote and support life-long learning</i>	11
<i>Be implementable in our school</i>	2
<i>Have the capacity to respond to future curricular needs and priorities</i>	2

It is clear from this data that school leaders perceive that parents and students are likely to buy in to the aims to deliver greater flexibility, student-centred pathways and curricular choice, while their teaching staffs will look for feasibility in the changes and will wish to protect the strengths of existing programmes to a greater degree. Our school leaders anticipate that teachers will be more likely to fear an erosion of existing pedagogical norms and therefore resist changes. **Strong leadership will be required to build an effective student pathway through senior cycle in the context of these tensions.**

Assessment and Reporting

The NCCA's "Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report 2022" contended that assessment practices are central to the redevelopment of the senior cycle. It emphasised the need for assessment and reporting arrangements to align with the evolving curriculum and flexible learning pathways. Specifically, the report pointed out that the current system, largely based on final exams, is seen as contributing to high stress levels among students and limiting the scope of assessment practices. Therefore, the report advocated for broadening the range of assessment methods to include diverse forms of evaluation across the senior cycle, allowing students to showcase a wider array of learning outcomes.

The survey asked respondents to free-type their comments in relation to assessment and reporting. The following is a summary of the themes that emerged.

1. Increased Workload and Administrative Challenges

- **Summary:** The introduction of AACs is seen as **resource-intensive** and burdensome, especially for **administrative oversight** and tasks like uploading AACs and verifying authenticity of student work. **Principals and senior leadership teams (SLTs)** are worried about the **additional burden** of managing this process, which is seen as **time-consuming** and requiring substantial resources. This reflects a concern over the **practicality** of the new system in its current form.
- **Quote:** "Significant administration support is required to manage this. The JCPA is a nightmare; it takes a disproportionate amount of time to put it together and is of no value or importance to students or parents."

2. AI and Plagiarism Concerns

- **Summary:** There is widespread **anxiety** about the potential **use of AI** in completing AACs, especially in ensuring that the work submitted is genuinely the student's own. Some respondents raised concerns about the **legal implications** if a student's work is found to be plagiarised or AI-assisted. There are also concerns about **resource limitations** in dealing with the complexities of **AI verification** and ensuring **authenticity**.
- **Quote:** "[Dealing with] challenges [about the] use of AI in AACs. This is a huge source of anxiety with Principals and subject teachers as they are expected to sign off on these projects guaranteeing that they are the students' own work... are there legal implications for Principals here?"

3. Need for Clearer Reporting and Timeliness

- **Summary:** Respondents expressed concerns about the **current inadequacies** in the **reporting system**, with **delayed feedback** causing uncertainty about when students will receive their results. The **timeliness** of feedback is seen as crucial to **student decision-making**, as delays could prevent students from making **informed decisions** about their future learning or career choices. There is also concern about the **absence of a national framework** for reporting, which could result in **inconsistencies** across schools.
- **Quote:** "It is unclear how and when students will receive results from AACs, and whether this feedback will be timely enough to support reflection, improvement, or informed decision-making about future learning or career pathways."

4. Stress and Mental Health

- **Summary:** There is a concern that the focus on assessments could **negatively impact student wellbeing**, particularly as the emphasis on AACs grows. Some school leaders worry that the **pressure** of managing these assessments might **detract from extracurricular activities**, which are essential for **holistic student development**. The **increased workload** and **stress levels** could affect both **students** and **staff**, potentially leading to a more **stressful environment**.
- **Quote:** *"This will impact on extra & co-curricular activities all of which are crucial aspects of student life. Ultimately student wellbeing will diminish as assessment, formative and summative become the focus in all schools."*

5. Ethics and Oversight

- **Summary:** **Ethical concerns** around assessment processes, especially with subjects studied externally, have been raised. Respondents are concerned about potential **disputes** with parents and students regarding the **authenticity** of student work. Some respondents are calling for **greater oversight**, such as **moderators** visiting schools to **vet projects** and help resolve disputes, in order to **ensure fairness** and consistency in assessments.
- **Quote:** *"Moderators should visit as in the case of PLC colleges to vet sample projects or those disputed by parents / students."*

6. Resource Requirements and Support

- **Summary:** Several leaders noted the **need for more resources**, including **administrative support** and better **IT infrastructure**, to effectively manage the assessment process. There is a strong call for **additional positions** (such as dedicated roles) to handle the increased administrative load, ensuring that schools can properly manage the **additional tasks** brought about by the new assessment system.
- **Quote:** *"School leaders require MAJOR professional development to plan for managing the [Senior Cycle] assessment and also additional admin support grants; IT supports and AP posts."*

7. Fairness and Equity

- **Summary:** Concerns about the **fairness** of the new system were mentioned, particularly following the use of **predicted grades** and the perceived **inequities** across different schools. School leaders indicated that there may be discrepancies in how grades are assigned or inflated across schools, which could **disadvantage some students** and undermine **equity** in the assessment process.
- **Quote:** *"Students want a fair system across all schools. Our students believe this is achieved in the current system of LC examinations. They used the example of the Predicted grades where grades were inflated more in some schools which was not fair/equitable."*

8. Impact on Teaching Focus

- **Summary:** A concern was expressed that the growing emphasis on assessments might overshadow the primary role of **teaching**. Some respondents expressed a desire for a shift back to focusing on **effective teaching** that breaks down subject specifications and engages students, rather than constantly managing the pressure of assessments.
- **Quote:** *"Need to totally refocus the obsession with assessment - focus needs to be on teaching breaking down the subject specifications."*

Leadership and Management of the Practicalities of Assessment and Reporting

Respondents clearly demonstrate an awareness of the implications of the practicalities of the increase in AACs for senior management. Senior leadership resources are again identified as being central.

The table below indicates the responses to the following question:

In relation to the practical implications of expanded assessment components, who do you think will be required to lead/manage the following scenarios?

Scenario	Principal	SLT	AP	Subject Dept.	Teacher
Mediate where conflict emerges between a teacher and parent/student regarding the authenticity of project work.	63.2%	29.5%	5.3%	1.1%	1.1%
Signing off on the project work of external students	60.2%	18.3%	1.1%	3.2%	17.2%
Ensure that good practices are in place for the secure storage and retention of project work	33.7%	38.9%	8.4%	11.6%	7.4%
Final sign-off on project work	51.6%	12.6%	2.1%	9.5%	24.2%
Ensure projects have been correctly uploaded	19.1%	26.6%	7.4%	10.6%	36.2%

Reporting and Transitions

The NCCA's "Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report 2022" stated that:

The limited scope of reporting student achievement in Leaving Certificate Established and the difficulties experienced in utilising Leaving Certificate Applied reporting for transition purposes were also identified in the review. It was suggested that the recognition and reporting of student achievement should be broad enough to support transitions and be meaningful for the student both during senior cycle and in the future.

Respondents were asked to respond to this statement through this question:

Other than subject grading, what (if any) learning experiences and outcomes could, in the future, meaningfully be reported-on to students and parents in order to support post-school transitions?

Respondents were generally positively disposed towards the concept of a broader reporting of student achievement to support their transitions, however concerns were also expressed about how this could be achieved in reality. Concerns were also expressed as to how such reporting would be recognised by the third level institutions and employers.

The responses were rich in terms of the breadth of suggestions for reporting, such as:

1. Work Experience and Career-Related Experiences:

- **Work experience feedback** (e.g., feedback from guidance counsellors, work shadowing, and engagement with summer work camps).
- **Work experience modules** and **engagement with real-world projects or industry-linked learning**.
- **Exploration of career options** and **engagement with work-based learning**.

- **Commitment to extracurricular activities**, including sports teams, fundraising, or involvement in school events.
 - **Work experience in TY and LCVP** and other hands-on experiences.
- 2. **Skills and Competencies:**
 - **Competency-based assessments**, including skills like **communication**, **teamwork**, and **critical thinking**.
 - **Skills developed outside the classroom**, such as **interpersonal skills**, **problem-solving**, **self-management**, **well-being**, **resilience**, and **empathy**.
 - **Digital and practical certifications**, including online short courses or **micro-credentials** that could serve as supplementary qualifications.
- 3. **Extracurricular and Co-Curricular Activities:**
 - **Participation in extracurricular activities** like sports, music, debating, student council, or community service projects.
 - **Leadership roles** (e.g., student leadership, Meitheal, Meantóirí, Head Girl/Deputy roles).
 - **Involvement in school life and community engagement** through volunteering, school events, or charitable activities.
- 4. **Personal Development:**
 - **Development of key skills** like **communication**, **working with others**, **critical and creative thinking**, and **managing oneself**.
 - **Well-being and social-emotional development**, including engagement in **SPHE** or **well-being modules**.
 - **Maturity levels** and **student voice** participation in leadership and decision-making.
- 5. **Recognition of Achievements:**
 - **School attendance, punctuality**, and **commitment**.
 - **Awarding of certificates** for **participation** in events, leadership initiatives, and **positive behaviour**.
 - **School contributions of a non-academic nature**, such as **charitable involvement** and **community recognition**.
- 6. **Broader Reporting Systems:**
 - **Portfolio-based achievements** that capture a **wide range of student skills**, including work experience, extracurricular activities, and other learning experiences.
 - **Narrative-based reporting** or the use of **rubrics** to document personal growth, skills, and achievements.
 - **References for students** including insights into their **skills and aptitudes**.

While respondents demonstrated a very significant ideological buy-in, they were also very aware of the challenges that would come with their suggestions. These are summarised below:

1. Time and Workload:

- The most frequently cited challenge was the **time and workload** involved in collecting, collating, and verifying additional data. Many respondents were concerned about the **amount of time** required for teachers and school leaders to gather information and input it into reports.
- Some responses mentioned that adding further reporting would significantly **increase teacher workload**, and there were worries about how this would be managed given the already demanding responsibilities of educators.

2. Standardisation and Consistency:

- Many respondents expressed concerns about the **lack of standardisation** in reporting, particularly in the absence of a **national framework**. Without clear guidelines and criteria, there were worries about the **subjectivity** in reporting achievements and skills, and how schools might interpret and record broader learning outcomes differently.
- Respondents were concerned that **unequal standards** could emerge across schools, leading to **inconsistencies** in how achievements are reported and potentially undermining the fairness and credibility of the system.

3. Subjectivity and Bias:

- Several responses highlighted the **subjective nature** of reporting non-academic achievements, such as personal development, leadership, and extracurricular involvement. Some feared that this could lead to **bias or favouritism** in how students' contributions are reported and evaluated, potentially affecting fairness.
- There were concerns about **maintaining objectivity** and ensuring that subjective teacher comments did not unduly influence the reports or create tensions with students or parents.

4. Data Collection and Administration:

- **Collecting and managing data** for a broader range of student achievements was seen as a significant administrative challenge. There was concern about the **responsibility** for collecting, inputting, and verifying data, and questions about who would oversee the process.
- Some responses mentioned issues with existing **digital infrastructure** (e.g., **MIS systems**) not being user-friendly or capable of handling the additional workload. The **integration** of these broader data points into current systems was also seen as a challenge.

5. Fairness and Equity:

- Respondents were worried about the **equity of access** to extracurricular activities, leadership roles, and work experience, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who might not have the same opportunities to engage in such activities.
- The challenge of ensuring that **all students** are fairly recognised for their achievements was a key concern, especially in light of the **divides** between more and less advantaged students.

6. Training and Capacity:

- **Training** for teachers was identified as crucial to ensure that they are equipped to assess, document, and report on skills and achievements that fall outside traditional academic metrics. Some respondents also noted that schools would need **additional resources** and **capacity building** to handle these broader reporting requirements.
- There were concerns about the **clarity of guidelines** for assessing non-academic achievements, and how staff could be trained to document and report these in a consistent, fair manner.

7. Practicality and Feasibility:

- Several respondents questioned whether the system would be **practical** or **sustainable** in the long term, with some indicating that it might lead to a **“box-ticking” exercise** without real meaning for students, much like the experience with the JCPA.
- There was also concern about the **timing** of when reports would be made available to students and parents, with some fearing that the system would become **overwhelming** and **unsustainable** without sufficient time and resources to manage it.

8. Recognition:

- Many respondents raised the concern about the **real-world value** of reporting non-academic achievements. Without buy-in from **third-level institutions, employers**, and other stakeholders, they worried that the new system could be **devalued** or seen as **secondary** to academic results.
- The need for **widespread communication** and **understanding** of the value of these broader achievements was emphasised, especially in relation to how they are perceived by universities and employers.

Conducive Conditions – Supporting Senior Cycle Redevelopment

The respondents were asked: *from your experience of senior cycle redevelopment thus far, please rank the list in order of which are most in need of urgent attention by the Department of Education and Youth*

The following reflects how they were ranked with the percentage referring to the number of respondents who gave each conducive condition her or his **number one** ranking (however other high rankings, e.g. number two or three etc. also has a bearing on the overall ranking).

1. The securing of resources (29%)
2. Judicious timing and pacing of change (28%)
3. Shared purpose, vision and principles (17%)
4. Provision for enhanced professional support and learning (4%)
5. Effective communication (13%)
6. A strong focus on stakeholder engagement, planning and collaboration across a wide range of schools and organisations (6%)
7. The alignment of complementary policies, such as inclusion, digital strategy etc. (1%)
8. Continuing use of research (1%)

Senior Leadership and Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

The achievement of an impactful rollout of a redeveloped senior cycle will very much depend on school leadership. Much of research on the topic of successful schools points to the central importance of effective school leadership. Such leadership will be required to ensure that new pedagogies and assessment models make an actual difference to student experience and the enhancement of student knowledge, skills, values and dispositions.

In part, this will be achieved through a school leadership that bridges the gap between teacher professional development and actual classroom practice.

In that context, respondents were asked:

Do you and your senior leadership team see yourselves as part of the continuum of TPL (Teacher Professional Learning) at school level or is it solely Oide's responsibility? Please expand a little on your thinking.

Summary of Responses

SLTs View Themselves as Part of TPL:

- Many respondents emphasised that **SLTs are integral to the continuum of Teacher Professional Learning** at the school level. They see themselves as **key drivers of TPL** and play a role in facilitating and promoting teacher development alongside external agencies like Oide. This view aligns with the belief that school leadership has the best understanding of their staff's needs and is best placed to support **context-specific professional learning**.

- **Quote:** “Yes, we see ourselves as part of the continuum of TPL. Both as teachers & as school leaders. We observe the classes of all students and NQTs and teachers new to the school. Further training in the provision of leading TPL should be provided for SLTs.”

Challenges of Time and Workload:

- Despite recognising their role in TPL, **time constraints** and **workload issues** were often cited as barriers to fully engaging in the process. Many senior leaders expressed a desire to take more of an active role in leading TPL, but were constrained by the sheer volume of their other responsibilities. **Time management** is highlighted as a key issue that limits their ability to effectively support TPL initiatives.
- **Quote:** “Yes, the SLT must lead by example and embrace TPL, however, again, time is an issue. When do we do this? When do we get time to upskill?”

Reliance on Oide for Professional Learning:

- Several respondents pointed out that while they see themselves as part of the **TPL continuum**, they rely heavily on **Oide** for delivering high-quality, external professional development. Oide’s expertise is valued, especially when it comes to **content-specific training** and introducing **new pedagogical approaches**. There is an acknowledgment that Oide provides essential support, particularly for **new leaders** and areas that require **specialist knowledge**.
- **Quote:** “Yes, we see ourselves as part of the continuum of TPL but I think Oide plays a bigger part. Oide could provide training to schools to deliver the workshops within school time.”

Need for More Training for SLTs:

- While many SLTs see themselves as active participants in TPL, **more training for SLTs** in leading and facilitating professional learning is seen as necessary. Respondents highlighted the need for **training in leading TPL** within their school contexts, as well as **upskilling in facilitating reflective practice** and **collaborative learning**. There’s a call for **ongoing professional development for SLTs** to strengthen their capacity to lead TPL effectively.
- **Quote:** “We are part of the continuum of TPL. Senior leadership teams need more training in leading TPL at the school level to ensure it’s effective.”

Support and Partnership with Oide:

- There is a strong call for **collaboration between SLTs and Oide**, with many school leaders recognising the value of **external support** while also advocating for more school-driven leadership in TPL. Respondents suggested a **partnership model** where Oide plays a critical role in providing expertise, but **schools lead the way** in embedding professional learning into daily practice.
- **Quote:** “We are part of the continuum of TPL at school level. However, we need continued partnership with Oide, especially in providing guidance for newer leaders and training in key areas such as inclusive education and curriculum reform.”

Concerns about the Overburdening of SLTs:

- Despite recognising the importance of their role, several respondents expressed concerns about the **overburdening of SLTs**. There was concern that the responsibility for leading TPL may be added to an already heavy workload, which could be **unsustainable** without adequate resources

and support. Many expressed that they are **under immense pressure** from multiple initiatives and are unable to fully devote themselves to leading TPL without additional support.

- **Quote:** “Principals are BOMBARDED with initiatives, circulars, policies, expectations and have full responsibility and accountability with little authority.”

As a follow-up question, respondents were asked:

Who is best placed to unpack the training in the context of the school and ensuring its potential is fully realised for the benefit of students in your school?

The following is a summary of their responses

Senior Leadership Team (SLT) as Key Leaders:

- Many respondents (38%) strongly believe that the **Senior Leadership Team (SLT)** is best placed to **unpack training**, given their understanding of the school’s context, priorities, and the capacity to oversee and implement professional development. They also pointed out that **SLTs** can ensure that the training is integrated effectively into school practices.
- **Quote:** “The school’s senior leadership team, working with subject leaders and teachers, is best placed to unpack training in context. They understand the specific needs of their students and staff, and can align professional learning with school priorities.”

Collaboration Between SLT and Teachers:

- A strong theme emerged about the need for **collaboration** between the **SLT** and **teachers**, particularly subject leaders or coordinators. Many respondents emphasised that while SLTs play a critical role in leading and overseeing the process, **teachers and subject coordinators** are key to **translating training** into **subject-specific practices**.
- **Quote:** “The senior leadership team supporting subject departments and whole staff engagement.”

Role of Subject Coordinators and AP Post Holders:

- Many respondents pointed out that **subject coordinators** and **Assistant Principals (APs)** also have a significant role in unpacking and applying professional learning in the context of specific subjects and classroom practices. Their role is seen as bridging the gap between broader training and practical application in the classroom.
- **Quote:** “A combination of SLT, AP post holders and subject teachers.”

Need for a Dedicated Role or Program Coordinator:

- A few responses suggested that there should be a **designated role** (such as a **programme coordinator** or **learning coordinator**) specifically tasked with ensuring that training is implemented effectively. This role would focus on ensuring that the professional learning is unpacked in context, and properly supported and monitored.
- **Quote:** “A designated Programme co-ordinator at Junior and Senior Cycle.”

Oide's Role in Supporting Training Delivery:

- Although respondents generally agreed that the school leadership is crucial, some recognised that **Oide** plays an important role in **providing high-quality training** and **external expertise**. They pointed out that Oide's support is necessary, but it must be aligned with school needs and contextualised by school leaders.
- **Quote:** *"Ideally, Oide could provide training to schools to deliver the workshops within school time."*

Teacher Leadership:

- Several respondents mentioned that **teachers themselves** are best placed to unpack training in their specific classroom contexts. Teachers have a deep understanding of their subject matter, the students they work with, and the challenges they face. As such, they can **adapt training** to best meet the needs of their students.
- **Quote:** *"Subject teachers are undoubtedly best placed to unpack training in the context of their own classrooms and ensure its potential is fully realised for the benefit of students."*

Lack of Time and Resources:

- Some responses highlighted that the **lack of time** and **resources** available to the SLT and teachers could hinder the effective unpacking and application of training. The practical challenge is ensuring that the necessary **time, support, and dedicated resources** are available to make the training effective.
- **Quote:** *"We would need someone full time within the school to have nothing else to do but deal with this!"*

Conclusion

We have seen throughout the survey some examples of the tension between conservation and change. The NCCA's "Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report 2022" stated:

'Education often seeks to conserve what is most important, most valued and most needed for future generations. It seeks also to provide each generation with the capacity to cope with change and with what the future brings.'

This survey invited a response to this statement by means of the following prompt:

In your view, to what extent is a balance between conservation and change emerging in the senior cycle developments you've seen thus far?

Key Themes Identified:

1. Balance Between Conservation and Change:

- Many respondents acknowledged a **balance** emerging between **conserving traditional practices** and introducing **change**. The **terminal exam** is retained, but **new assessment methods** like AACs are being introduced. There's also a growing emphasis on **skills** and **competencies** alongside academic rigor.
- **Quote:** "Although the terminal examination is remaining it is important to see the fresh approach to more flexible assessment modes and focussing on key skills and competencies."

2. Too Much Change Too Quickly:

- Some respondents felt that the changes were being implemented too **rapidly** and that the pace of reform was overwhelming. The concern was that this **rushed approach** may hinder effective integration, with some also questioning whether enough attention has been paid to the **implications of new technologies** like AI.
- **Quote:** "Too much change."

3. Too Much Conservation:

- There was also a sentiment that the balance was tilted toward **conserving traditional methods**, particularly the **high-stakes exam system**, and **college entry systems** that continue to dominate. Some respondents felt that the changes being introduced were **insufficient** to address the more pressing challenges in education, such as the **over-reliance on terminal exams**.
- **Quote:** "It feels that it is all change - a change away from academics and knowledge."

4. Positive Shift Towards Holistic Education:

- Other responses pointed out that while the reforms include a **shift towards holistic education**, the **core values** like **subject knowledge** and **academic rigor** are still being preserved. There's a push towards **personalised learning**, **well-being**, and **skills development**, alongside traditional academic content.
- **Quote:** "The direction of travel from the JC to the conclusion of a student's post-primary educational journey is becoming more unified with greater opportunities provided and planned for students."

5. Scepticism About Effectiveness and Sustainability:

- Some respondents expressed scepticism about whether the reforms will lead to **lasting change**, especially if **structural challenges** such as the **CAO system** and issues related to **teacher training** and **resources** are not addressed. They warned that the reforms might be **overly cautious** or become **tokenistic** if not thoughtfully implemented.
- **Quote:** *“The reforms fail to meaningfully engage with the opportunities and challenges presented by new technologies, and they are not truly student-centred. As it stands, this feels like change for the sake of change.”*

6. Challenges with Equity and Access:

- A significant concern was the **impact of change** on **equity**, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There’s a worry that the reform process may disproportionately benefit **well-resourced schools**, leaving **less advantaged schools** behind. The **DEIS grant** was mentioned as insufficient to support schools in disadvantaged areas.
- **Quote:** *“In any reform process, the well-resourced middle-class schools will have the resources to provide high quality senior cycle programmes. More disadvantaged schools risk being left behind.”*

7. Concerns About the Role of AI in Assessment:

- Some respondents raised concerns about the integration of **AI** in assessment and how it might affect the **authenticity** of student work. They pointed out that while there are new assessment methods being introduced, the potential for **AI misuse** is not being adequately addressed.
- **Quote:** *“Concern is emerging about the skillset required to navigate the world of AI, thus creating an imbalance.”*

8. Need for Ongoing Consultation and Support:

- There was an emphasis on the importance of **ongoing consultation** and **support** to ensure that the reforms are effectively implemented and are **sustainable**. Respondents mentioned that the success of the reforms would depend on **communication** and ensuring that all **stakeholders**, including teachers, students, and parents, are involved in the process.
- **Quote:** *“The balance is emerging, but ongoing consultation, support and clarity will be needed to maintain the best of what we have, while embracing innovation that truly prepares students for the world they are entering.”*

Summary:

The responses reflect mixed opinions about the balance between conserving traditional practices and embracing change in the senior cycle. Some respondents are optimistic, seeing a positive shift towards holistic education, while others feel the reforms are happening too quickly or that core aspects of education, like subject knowledge and exam-based assessments, are not being adequately redefined. There is also concern about the impact on equity, particularly for students from disadvantaged schools, and the challenges posed by AI in assessments. Despite these concerns, many respondents believe that a delicate balance is emerging, and with continued consultation and support, the reforms can lead to a more flexible and future-oriented education system.

Hopes and Fears for the Next Five Years

Respondents were invited to reflect on their greatest hopes and/or fears for the next five years as the changes reach their schools. Their responses are summarised as follows.

Fears:

1. Burnout and Overload (17 mentions):

- A major concern is the potential for **burnout** among teachers and school leaders due to the **overwhelming workload** and **increased demands** of the reforms. Respondents feared that the **pace of change** and **lack of resources** would lead to exhaustion, negatively impacting both staff and students.
- **Quote:** *"My greatest fear is the new assessment components will increase pressure and spread it over a longer period, resulting in students giving up extracurricular activities."*

2. Implementation Challenges (13 mentions):

- There were **fears of rushed implementation** or **poor planning**, with concerns that the **lack of resources** and **support** would lead to **chaos** and **inequity** in schools. Respondents were particularly worried about the **implementation of new assessments** and the potential **mismatch** between the intended reforms and practical realities.
- **Quote:** *"There is a clear risk that the pace of change will outstrip our capacity to manage it effectively, leading to a mismatch between the intended reforms and what can be realistically implemented in schools. Without the necessary support and resources, this could create chaos and inequity in how the changes are applied across different schools."*

3. Teacher Training and Resources (14 mentions):

- Respondents expressed concerns that without adequate **training for teachers** and proper **resources**, the reforms would struggle to be fully realised. There were fears that teachers would be unprepared to implement the changes effectively due to insufficient **professional development**.
- **Quote:** *"I hope that we will have the training, time, and resources to implement the changes effectively."*

4. AI and Technology Integration (6 mentions):

- The potential **misuse of AI** in assessments and how it could affect the **authenticity** of student work was a prominent fear. Respondents were concerned that AI could **undermine the integrity** of assessments and students' critical thinking skills.
- **Quote:** *"Fears include reform fatigue among staff; being overwhelmed by the evolution of AI."*

5. Increased Stress for Students (9 mentions):

- Several respondents feared that the **increased demands on students** from the new assessment system, including project work and AACs, would lead to **stress** and **burnout**, making it difficult for students to balance their academic and extracurricular lives.
- **Quote:** *"The greatest fear is that the AAC will cause stress, making students give up extracurricular activities."*

6. Equity and Access (7 mentions):

- Concerns about **inequity** in the reforms were raised, particularly regarding the gap between **well-resourced schools** and **disadvantaged schools**. There was a fear that the reforms could exacerbate existing disparities, particularly in areas like access to technology and support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Quote:** *"I worry that schools not designated as DEIS, but still serving students with significant needs, will continue to be overlooked in terms of support and funding, creating a two-tier system of implementation."*

Hopes:

1. Improved Resources and Support (21 mentions):

- Many respondents expressed a hope that the **necessary resources, funding, and administrative support** would be provided to ensure the success of the senior cycle reforms. They hoped that schools would be equipped with the right tools to implement the changes effectively and support students in making meaningful choices.
- **Quote:** *"That we are resourced properly in our allocation to allow us to make the changes and be attractive to students as they make choices."*

2. More Inclusive and Student-Centred Education (18 mentions):

- Respondents hoped the reforms would lead to a **more inclusive** and **holistic** education system that goes beyond academic achievement to also focus on **emotional intelligence, well-being, and life skills**. There was an emphasis on creating a system that values **diverse strengths** and **supports student growth** in multiple dimensions.
- **Quote:** *"I hope that this reform will bring about the necessary changes and improvements to the lives of our students."*

3. Reduced Focus on Terminal Exams (12 mentions):

- Many hoped that the **new assessment methods** would lead to **less focus on high-stakes terminal exams**, allowing for a more balanced approach to assessment that recognises a broader range of skills and achievements. This could reduce stress and better prepare students for life beyond school.
- **Quote:** *"Hope: Less focus on terminal exam."*

4. Greater Teacher Empowerment (10 mentions):

- There was hope that the reforms would **empower teachers**, providing them with the **time, training, and trust** to innovate in their classrooms. Respondents expressed a desire for teachers to be able to **adapt to new pedagogies** and be **supported** in their efforts to create meaningful learning experiences for students.
- **Quote:** *"That teachers will be supported with time, training, and trust to innovate in their classrooms, embracing new methods, interdisciplinary learning, and real-world connections."*

5. Holistic Learning and Well-being (9 mentions):

- A key hope was that the **reformed senior cycle** would foster a more **holistic approach to learning**, prioritising **student well-being** and **personal development** alongside academic success. There was a belief that the reforms could help students become more **adaptable** and **emotionally resilient** in the face of future challenges.
- **Quote:** *“My greatest hope is that the changes will lead to more well-rounded students, not just academically capable but also emotionally intelligent, adaptable, and prepared for life beyond school.”*

6. Flexibility and Pathways for All Students (8 mentions):

- Respondents hoped for a **flexible senior cycle** that offered **multiple pathways** for students, allowing them to pursue diverse interests and talents. There was hope that the reforms would help students find a path that suits their **individual strengths** and **aspirations**, whether academic or vocational.
- **Quote:** *“My greatest hope is that senior cycle reform becomes a genuine catalyst for inclusion, relevance, and student empowerment.”*

7. Reduced Teacher and Student Stress (7 mentions):

- There was hope that the reforms would **reduce stress** for both **teachers** and **students**, especially in terms of **exam pressures**. Some respondents hoped that the introduction of **AACs** and other assessment methods would provide a **more balanced** and **manageable system**.
- **Quote:** *“I hope that this will lead to greater engagement for students and a reduction in stress caused by the weight of a ‘terminal exam’ system.”*

8. Long-Term Transformation of Senior Cycle (6 mentions):

- Many respondents hoped that the senior cycle reforms would lead to a **long-term transformation** in how education is delivered, focusing more on **student agency** and preparing students not only for exams but also for their **future careers** and **life challenges**.
- **Quote:** *“Hope: That the redevelopment of senior cycle will encourage greater student participation in their own learning, 2 that this process of change will continue to maintain high standards within post-primary education.”*

Summary and Conclusions

1. Purpose and Vision of Senior Cycle Education

- The survey found that the primary focus of senior cycle education, according to school leaders, should be on developing students' engagement, competence, and personal growth. The second priority was to continue to educate the whole person.
- **Wellbeing and Mental Health:** Wellbeing, mental health, and moral education emerged as important, with many leaders emphasizing the need to focus on emotional resilience and lifelong learning.
- **Alignment with NCCA Vision:** A large majority (63%) of respondents believed that the NCCA's vision for senior cycle education aligned with their school's mission statement. A further 31% said it did so 'to a large extent'.

2. Leadership and Resources

- **Increased Leadership Capacity:** 88% of respondents indicated that **additional senior leadership capacity** is needed to manage the increased workload associated with senior cycle reform.
- **Resource Needs:** Schools reported significant needs in terms of staffing, time allocation, ICT infrastructure, and professional development. There was a clear demand for more leadership posts, particularly Deputy Principals.
- **Teacher Allocation:** Respondents highlighted the need for improved teacher-student ratios to accommodate the broader curriculum requirements.

3. Professional Development and Training

- **Need for Targeted Training:** There is a strong call for professional development (TPL) for teachers to help them adapt to new senior cycle models, particularly in areas like student-centred learning and interdisciplinary teaching.
- **Teacher Collaboration:** Teachers and school leaders require **structured time** to plan, collaborate, and engage in professional learning. **Subject coordinator posts** and additional **planning time** were seen as critical for fostering teacher collaboration.
- **Engagement in Embedding TPL in School Life:** School leaders expressed a clear desire to be actively involved in embedding Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) within their school cultures. They recognize the importance of fostering a continuous learning environment where both teachers and leaders can engage in ongoing professional development, tailored to the specific needs of their school context. They identified administrative burdens and initiative overload as a barrier to this engagement.

4. Assessment and Reporting

- **Increased Burden of AACs:** There is concern over the administrative burden created by the new AACs. Many school leaders felt that the process of managing and submitting AACs was resource-intensive and time-consuming.

- **Concerns About AI and Plagiarism:** A significant concern emerged around the use of AI in completing assessments, with many respondents worried about ensuring that work submitted by students is authentic.
- **Fairness and Equity:** Many school leaders raised concerns about the fairness of the assessment system, particularly in light of the experience of predicted grades and the potential inequities across schools in terms of resources and access to support.

5. Pathways and Flexibility

- **Flexible Pathways:** There was a strong desire to reduce the ring-fencing of existing programs and provide a broader range of learning pathways for students, including vocational, technical, and creative options.
- **Challenges for Level 1 and Level 2 Learners:** Schools highlighted the challenges of providing meaningful senior cycle pathways for students completing Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes, due to the lack of resources and specialised staff.
- **Implementation Challenges for Flexible Pathways:** Despite the desire for more diverse pathways, many schools face and would face significant logistical and resource constraints in implementing these pathways. Challenges include limited staff expertise, insufficient curriculum flexibility, and lack of appropriate facilities to offer a broad spectrum of options, particularly in smaller or under-resourced schools. Likewise, there were strong concerns about the practical challenges of a broader reporting system (though respondents were very supportive of the concept).

6. Student Wellbeing

- **Mental Health Support:** There was a growing recognition of the importance of mental health and guidance services for students. Respondents stressed the need for more guidance counsellors to help manage the increasing demands on students.
- **Impact of Assessment on Wellbeing:** The increased focus on project-based assessments and AACs was seen as a potential stressor for students, leading to concerns about the balance between academic pressure and extracurricular activities.

7. Equity and Inclusion

- **Concerns about Inequality:** A key concern was the risk of widening inequality. Many school leaders believed that disadvantaged schools would struggle to keep up with the reforms, especially in terms of resources and teacher availability.
- **Access to Resources:** Respondents highlighted that well-resourced schools would likely benefit the most from the reforms, while less well-resourced schools could face significant barriers.

8. Future Directions and Support

- **Support for Senior Cycle Reform:** There is a call for the Department of Education to provide more financial and administrative support for schools, including additional staff and resources to help schools implement the changes.
- **Guidance on New Assessment Models:** Clear, consistent guidance on new forms of assessment and how to manage them is needed, particularly concerning new technologies like AI.

9. Concerns for the Future

- **Overburdened Leaders and Teachers:** Many respondents were concerned that school leaders and teachers are already overburdened with initiatives, and that the pace of change could lead to burnout.
- **Implementation Challenges:** Some leaders feared that the reforms may not be effectively implemented due to the lack of resources, unclear communication, and insufficient training.

10. Hopes for the Future

- **Improved Resources and Support:** There is a significant hope that more resources and training could ensure successful implementation of senior cycle reforms, as well as a greater focus on student-centred learning.
- **Reduced Focus on High-Stakes Exams:** A common hope is for less reliance on terminal exams and a shift toward a more holistic, student-centred approach to assessment. Though concerns are also expressed that this hope would only be realised if there were to be changes to the college-entry system.

In Summary

The survey findings point to a broad consensus on the need for:

- Increased senior leadership capacity
- Better resources (ICT, staffing, pastoral, funding etc.)
- Enhanced professional development for teachers
- Enhanced professional development for school leaders to lead curriculum change
- Clearer guidelines/regulations around assessment changes

While there is strong support for a vision of more flexible and inclusive pathways, concerns persist about the administrative burden, fairness of assessments, and the equity of reforms across schools. Concerns persist around the capacity of the current model of teacher allocation to support such reform.

Respondents are hopeful that well-supported reforms can lead to a more inclusive, holistic education system that better prepares students for the future while addressing mental health and wellbeing needs.

Thanks

JMB would like to sincerely thank the school leaders who gave so generously of their time to complete this survey.



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