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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EAMONN CARROLL, SELINA MCCOY AND KEYU YE



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Eamonn Carroll

Selina McCoy

Keyu Ye

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Irish education system is undergoing significant change as it navigates the challenges of the 2020s. Schools are at the frontline of Ireland's efforts to integrate migrant families, build an inclusive society and tackle generational socioeconomic inequality. They are also, increasingly, key sites of contestation over deep social questions like the place of faith and secularism in public institutions and the best path to ensuring young people thrive, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. While many of these challenges resonate across the second-level sector as all schools grapple with the difficulties and opportunities of educating young adults in today's Ireland, the focus of this report is on the voluntary secondary school sector.

The report presents rich evidence from a mixed-method research study across 21 voluntary secondary schools. The research was commissioned by the Joint Managerial Body for Voluntary Secondary Schools (JMB), with the research questions designed to examine the features and experiences of students, teachers and school leaders across the voluntary sector. However, the study allows for comparisons between experiences in voluntary secondary schools and other sectors. In particular, the survey of students undertaken in this study is compared to the nationally representative longitudinal study *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) and the International Student Assessment (PISA study) on 15 year olds in Ireland and across the European Union (EU). This approach allows for a deep exploration of the voluntary secondary sector, while also placing experiences in a national and international context.

Voluntary secondary schools, accounting for over half of all second-level schools, are privately owned and managed but are largely publicly funded schools, usually under the patronage of an individual body such as a religious community, a charitable trust or a private charitable company. The voluntary secondary sector includes an increasingly diverse school profile, particularly in terms of denomination and ethos. They are distinct from the other two sectors, Education and Training Board (ETB) schools and community and comprehensive (C&C) schools in relation to the management structures in operation and the type of education traditionally offered. Traditionally, voluntary secondary schools offered academic instruction to 'academic students' while vocational schools (as they were then called) offered vocational and practical instruction, implicitly (and often explicitly) to 'non-academic students'. Such differences have narrowed significantly over time, and the trend remains towards convergence.

This study examines two key issues. Firstly, it seeks to consider whether the voluntary secondary sector remains distinct from the other sectors in terms of the cohort of students who attend. Secondly, it explores two areas in which voluntary secondary schools are distinct – the specific ethos of each voluntary secondary school and the gender mix across the sector. It also aims to capture the contribution of the voluntary secondary sector to the Irish education system more broadly, attempting to take a holistic view of what schools are doing and how they are doing it.

In 2023, a large-scale mixed-method research study was conducted across 21 voluntary secondary schools, selected to represent the national profile of schools in the sector in size, gender and composition. The research included a survey with second and fifth year students (N=2,243), focus groups with students, interviews with school personnel, parents, members of school boards of management and key stakeholders across eight organisations.

RESULTS

The report analyses diverse perspectives within (and beyond) the voluntary secondary sector across key dimensions, including school ethos and culture, school gender mix, the student experience, teaching and learning, the (enduring) impact of COVID-19, student wellbeing, non-academic aspects of school life, as well as the unique challenges and strengths of this sector.

- The voluntary secondary sector has long included a diverse **school profile**, in terms of school size, location, gender mix, denomination and ethos. While nearly 90% of voluntary secondary schools have a Catholic ethos, there are sizeable numbers of Church of Ireland, inter- and multi-denominational schools, and a number of Quaker, Jewish, Methodist, Presbyterian and Educate Together schools within the sector. Differences between the three sectors in intake and outcome have narrowed over time, though some differences remain. However, the diversity *within* the voluntary secondary sector remains pronounced, with different voluntary secondary schools serving different populations in a variety of ways.
- The **ethos** valued by students includes community-building, extracurricular engagement, balancing academic and personal development, and a commitment to inclusion and diversity. Despite varying views on religious ethos, building a school ethos emphasising student-centricity, diversity, inclusion and community-building emerged across the schools.
- In terms of **school gender mix**, historical data indicate an increase in the percentage of students attending coeducational schools. Students, regardless of attending single-sex or coeducational schools, favoured coeducational settings, while preferences varied among staff and parents. Although some students believed their school's gender mix supported their learning and

preparedness for the future, fewer than 20% of respondents in single-sex schools preferred their school's gender mix, compared to almost 90% in coeducational schools.

- In terms of **curriculum**, gender differences persist in the subjects available to students and in terms of their actual subject choices, as well as in the extent to which different subjects are seen as interesting or difficult. Only a small minority of students find learning Irish interesting, raising implications for the national language. At Junior Cycle concerns arose around an excessive emphasis on exams, the added pressure placed on students by the classroom-based assessments (CBAs), the removal of foundation level papers in the Junior Cycle Framework, a perceived lack of challenge, the high numbers receiving a 'merit' and a lack of preparedness for the Senior Cycle.
- Overall, **technology** was seen to enhance teaching and learning experiences, facilitate communication, support collaborative work and develop independent learning skills. However, there was awareness that its effectiveness depends on how it is used.
- Despite strong **environmental awareness**, students reported limited engagement in related activities. While students reflected positively on their social, academic and personal development, they were less positive about their schools' role in building self-confidence, encouraging reading for pleasure and, in particular, making friends with the opposite sex. Although most students actively participated in sports and physical activities (dependent on the volunteerism of teachers), levels of participation declined in Senior Cycle and activity levels were also lower among girls, students with special educational needs (SEN) and those from economically vulnerable families.
- Regarding schools' **academic and SEN supports**, some students expressed concerns about their specific learning needs not being met. There was a preference among students for more individualised or small group supports. Concerns were raised in relation to increasing demands placed on schools, difficulties in securing staff with the necessary professional qualifications and skills, infrastructural deficits and appropriate classroom design to accommodate diverse needs.
- The results provide important evidence of an enduring **impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** on student motivation, socio-emotional wellbeing, social development and ability to reconnect with peers and manage stress.
- **Life satisfaction** levels also varied widely, being somewhat lower among girls, students with additional needs and those from economically vulnerable families. Students who report feeling they belong at school and who perceive better wellbeing supports at school are more likely to score higher on life satisfaction. The potential detrimental impacts of increased technology use on students' wellbeing were also noted, coupled with calls for enhanced professional development for teachers to support wellbeing.
- While the experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and since has highlighted the urgent need for **professional, therapeutic supports** for children and young

adults, the results from this study also highlight the importance of resourcing all school communities to provide a diversity of enriching activities within and outside the classroom to support young people as they develop.

- The report concludes with some over-arching **challenges** facing the voluntary secondary sector, including resources and funding and challenges in relation school leadership. Interviews with school leaders also highlighted concerns related to meeting day-to-day costs such as heating and insurance, as well as challenges in maintaining old and often unsuitable school buildings built for a different era. Finally, the report concludes by discussing the deep attachment and pride felt by many respondents from across the school community towards their schools.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Implications for the voluntary secondary sector

Throughout this study, the evidence has shown that students with fewer family resources and those with additional needs generally fare less well than their peers across a range of domains and outcomes. Students attending DEIS schools were found to benefit in terms of curricular provision, a strong emphasis on literacy skills, opportunities to participate in sports (particularly for girls), their role in decision-making and the nature of their interaction with their teachers. However, two challenges emerged. Schools serving disadvantaged communities that are not part of the DEIS programme struggled to meet high levels of student need. A second larger problem related to the capacity of schools to meet growing student and community need, particularly in a context of funding shortfalls for schools, argued to be more pressing in the voluntary secondary sector. School leaders and wider stakeholders asked the question, how much can schools realistically do?

Students attending fee-charging schools benefit from additional resources, which manifest in a diversity of ways. Students report higher levels of engagement (including liking school, working hard at school and viewing schoolwork as worth doing), lower levels of school absence, higher academic self-image, greater support for higher-level maths take-up, greater levels of participation in sports (particularly among girls), and school cultures marked by a stronger focus on values and student voice. While many stakeholders in fee-charging schools emphasised the inclusivity and diversity of their student body, others pointed to a tension between these values and the exclusionary effect of charging fees. Interviewees in fee-charging schools pointed to the challenges caused by the lower level of public funding they receive, especially in terms of building maintenance and development and teacher retention. However, none of these interviewees foresaw a move away from the fee-charging model in the near term, as they felt this would undermine the school's ability to sustain its current level of curricular and extracurricular offerings to students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and enduring impact on young people and their families and schools. Fifth year students missed out on crucial phase in terms of their maturation, in particular missing out on engagements with school over third and fourth year, which they see as impacting on their learning now. Stakeholders and experts continue to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on young people's mental health, highlighting dramatic increases in referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Additional cost of living supports were provided in Budget 2023 to mitigate inflationary pressures on schools, as well as €5 million for mental health supports for the 2022/2023 academic year. However, it is likely that much greater funding will be required to provide adequate preventive and early interventions as well as treatment in schools and other settings.

The scale of the preference expressed by students for coeducation was a surprise, with only a small minority of students in single-sex schools actively preferring their current school gender mix. One issue that came to the fore in our conversations with students, and in the survey data, related to participation in sports among girls, particularly girls in coeducational settings. Students in some (but not all) coeducational schools highlighted a hierarchy of opportunity, with boys' sports taking centre stage. A dominance of male-orientated sport in coeducational settings has also been found in other countries and is explicitly acknowledged in the European Commission's Gender Equality in Sport statement. There is a clear need to promote gender equality in sport, including school-based sport.

Community featured strongly, reflecting the inclusion of all students and the positive relationships between staff and students. Students see respect as the driving force of the ethos in their school, linked to valuing students for who they are and also to students reciprocating this respect and engagement. The question of how a religious ethos fits into an increasingly secular society is one which raised strong opinions on both sides, as well as a sizeable contingent of people who didn't feel strongly about it one way or the other. Overall, there was a sense in many schools of the ethos developing significantly over time, softening and opening up to more religious diversity among the student population. Religion was also highlighted by students for its important role in promoting awareness, tolerance and respect. Students are less positive about their voice and involvement in school decision-making processes, raising an important issue for schools to address.

As well as concerns over the adequacy of supports and facilities, school leaders highlighted the considerable demands being placed on them across the multiplicity of roles they play – administrative, financial, human resources, industrial relations, infrastructural. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasised the excessive and wide-reaching demands placed on school leaders, the inadequacy of supports provided and the widespread implications in terms of burnout and retention. While research

prior to the pandemic showed wide variation across schools in the extent to which digital technologies were embedded in teaching and learning (Marcus-Quinn et al., 2019), this study shows wide variations persist in the post-COVID era. Students are acutely aware of these differences and are particularly vocal on the perceived shortcomings in teacher competencies in this regard. As well as state-of-the-art digital hardware and software, a key challenge also relates to the availability of digital resources.

Implications for national education policy

Weaknesses in the Junior Cycle Framework have been highlighted in this study, particularly in terms of CBAs not being experienced as a positive learning experience by some students and teachers and a mismatch between Junior and Senior Cycle education, raising important issues for policy. It is interesting to note that recent publications from the longitudinal study of the Junior Cycle Framework echo the results of our research in voluntary secondary schools.

Overall, students across voluntary secondary schools did not seem to be engaged in activities that promote global competence, but largely consider themselves as being respectful towards people from other cultures. In view of the importance of an informed citizenry, the evidence supports the argument for a greater focus on civic and cultural education.

Students, staff and wider stakeholders spoke repeatedly of the importance of inclusion in schools. Many students spoke of their school's ethos as embodying inclusion and inclusive values. Researchers have been increasingly debating what inclusion should look like, particularly in terms of supporting students with additional educational needs. Commentators have suggested that the proliferation of special classes creates a tension with policy objectives around inclusion (Kenny et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2016). Students in this study valued being withdrawn in small groups for extra supports, rather than more fixed and larger groupings, raising an important issue for policy.

Finally, this study has highlighted how school infrastructural deficits and teacher supply problems are impacting the capacity of schools to offer a diversity of curricular and extracurricular activities. The findings also highlight that the system is reliant on volunteerism to provide extracurricular programmes and stakeholders question the sustainability of this. Harford and Fleming (2023) note that while the issue of a steady supply of teachers has been a feature of the evolving complexion of the Irish educational landscape for decades, the problem has become more pronounced in recent years.

Within an evolving system, this report shows some strengths of voluntary secondary schools that should be preserved. In particular, in a time of increasing focus on international standardised assessment measures like PISA or Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) scores as the measure of an education system, the commitment of voluntary secondary schools to the holistic development of students as part of a school community is more important than ever. Schools are not just places where young people learn testable subject matter, they are a dense web of educational experiences and social relations where children are shaped into adults. We hope this report gives a sense of how voluntary secondary schools are going about this work at the moment, and how they might continue doing so in the future.

Whitaker Square,
Sir John Rogerson's Quay,
Dublin 2
Telephone **+353 1 863 2000**
Email **admin@esri.ie**
Web **www.esri.ie**
Twitter **@ESRIDublin**