

Junior Cycle

Statement of Assurances 29 November 2016

Department of Education and Skills & Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland

INTRODUCTION

1. Background

This statement arises from discussions held between the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) concerning the ongoing reform of Junior Cycle.

Arrangements for the implementation of the *Junior Cycle Framework 2015* were set out in *Junior Cycle Reform: Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation May 2015* and in the related *Appendix to Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation July 2015*. These documents – the *Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation May 2015* and the *Appendix to the Joint Statement July 2015* – provided certain reassurances to all post-primary teachers regarding Junior Cycle reform. It is recognised that these documents, although agreed between representatives of the teachers' unions and the Department, were not endorsed by ASTI members in a ballot in 2015.

2. Purpose of this statement

The purpose of this statement is to provide assurances to ASTI members on areas of concern that they continue to have regarding the implementation of Junior Cycle reform, the *Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation May 2015* and the *Appendix to the Joint Statement July 2015*. These assurances are consistent with the *Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation May 2015* and the *Appendix to the Joint Statement July 2015*. They address issues related to the following:

- Workload
- Support for teachers through continuing professional development (CPD) programmes
- Classroom-based Assessments (CBAs)
- Common levels for subjects other than English, Irish and Mathematics
- Oral assessments in Irish and modern languages
- The use of standardised testing to report on student progress

3. Principles underpinning Junior Cycle

This statement recognises the endorsement by all parties of the five immutable principles which underpin the reform of the Junior Cycle and which are set out in the *Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation May 2015* and the *Appendix to the Joint Statement July 2015*. These are:

- The need to recognise a wide range of learning
- A requirement to considerably reduce the focus on one terminal examination as a means of assessing our students
- The necessity of giving prominence and importance to classroom-based assessment
- Greater professional collaboration between teachers to be a feature of our schools
- Both parents/guardians and students to get a broader picture of students' learning throughout the whole of Junior Cycle.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

4. Workload

- 4.1. *Members of the ASTI have expressed concern that the workload associated with the implementation of Junior Cycle reform is onerous and likely to increase exponentially as additional new subject specifications are implemented over the coming years.*
- 4.2. *The Appendix to the Joint Statement July 2015 sets out a requirement that all time periods provided to support implementation of Junior Cycle must be used for this purpose under the overall direction of the school's management. Members of the ASTI have expressed concern that this requirement will diminish the professional autonomy of individual teachers in determining how best to use the time.*
- 4.3. *Members of the ASTI have expressed concern that schools will struggle to access sufficient substitution to facilitate cover for teachers attending SLAR and other meetings required for the implementation of the Junior Cycle.*

The Department provides the following assurances:

- 4.4. Following the conclusion of discussions with the teacher unions on the *Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation May 2015* and the *Appendix to the Joint statement July 2015* the Department has formally provided for newly funded professional time for teachers to support the implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* in schools. This time has been provided in accordance with the *Appendix to Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation July 2015* and is also set out in DES Circular 24/2016. This funded professional time is intended to support:
 - Whole-school professional activities to support the Junior Cycle (for all teachers)
 - Individual Teacher and Subject Department professional activity including Assessment for Learning (AfL), feedback, reporting and inputs compiled for the JCPA (for all Junior Cycle teachers)
 - Subject Learning and Assessment Review meetings (for all Junior Cycle teachers)
 - Time for some teachers to facilitate the preparation for and coordination of each Subject Learning and Assessment Review meeting
 - Time for administration of SEC Assessment Tasks.
- 4.5. With effect from September 2017, and as provided for in the *Appendix to the Joint Statement July 2015* and Circular 24/2016, the class contact time for all full-time teachers with junior cycle classes will be reduced to a maximum class contact time each week of 21 hours and 20 minutes, with a pro-rata reduction in class contact time for part-time teachers.
- 4.6. Budget 2017 provides for the appointment of 550 whole-time equivalent teaching posts from 1 September 2017 to facilitate this reduction in class contact time for teachers. In the 2016/17 school year, the Department is also providing for the allocation of additional paid substitution hours to schools in order to phase in the professional time for teachers of English, Science and Business.

4.7. The Department reiterates the assurance given in the *Appendix to the Joint Statement July 2015* that, “Teachers can be assured that the time provided to them individually can be used by them for the range of purposes set out above”. It is happy to provide the following elaboration of the assurances contained in the *Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation May 2015* and the *Appendix to the Joint Statement July 2015*:

- Within the provision of 22 hours professional time for the full-time teacher, there is a requirement to allocate 2 hours for Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings each year for each Junior Cycle subject
- It is noted that *Appendix to the Joint Statement July 2015* provides that all periods of professional time provided to support the implementation of Junior Cycle must be used for this purpose under the overall direction of the school’s management
- In this context, school management should ensure that decisions made at whole-school level regarding priorities for the use of this professional time do not erode the professional autonomy of teachers but rather respect this professional autonomy.

5. Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

5.1. *While acknowledging that they have not availed of the Continuing Professional Development opportunities provided in respect of Junior Cycle implementation, members of the ASTI have expressed concern about the focus of CPD events facilitated by the Junior Cycle for Teachers service (JCT). In particular, they are concerned about a perception that there is a heavy emphasis on assessment practice and that modes of delivery should ensure that the courses are accessible to all teachers.*

5.2. *Members of the ASTI have also requested that CPD provision in which ASTI members may participate in the future would recognise the particular requirements of those teachers at this stage of the implementation process, in the context of non-attendance at earlier CPD sessions.*

The Department provides the following assurances:

5.3. An extensive programme of CPD for school leaders and teachers is being provided by JCT. To date, this has included a number of day-long events focussed on providing teachers with opportunities to familiarise themselves with the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* and the specifications for each subject as they are developed.

5.4. The CPD programme offered by JCT is designed to be ongoing and comprehensive, providing support to teachers across a range of areas including learning, teaching and assessment. The support programme includes, for example, a focus on

- The Framework’s principles, key skills and statements of learning
- Implementation of effective teaching and learning strategies in the context of the Framework
- Planning the Junior Cycle programme
- ICT in the classroom
- Effective evaluation and assessment practices.

- 5.5. The modes through which JCT support is available include:
- School-based support on an individual school or cluster-of-schools basis, for whole staffs, subject teacher groupings or individual teachers
 - On-line support, through which materials provided by JCT are shared with teachers
 - Printed/hard copy documents and materials provided at CPD sessions
 - Email and telephone support from JCT.
- 5.6. Feedback on CPD delivered to date has been positive. Teachers who have attended have reported that the CPD provided is relevant; includes a broad range of topics, including assessment; and has been helpful in equipping them in implementing the revised subject specification.
- 5.7. The roll-out of broadband services to all post-primary schools will support teachers' access to all online JCT material in their schools. Recognising the connectivity challenges in some locations, the Department will provide teachers with the materials on a USB stick on request.
- 5.8. Issues arising concerning CPD and any other implementation issues arising are being monitored and addressed by the Implementation Committee constituted under the *Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation May 2015*. To date, a number of issues regarding CPD have been successfully resolved at the Implementation Committee and the Department is committed to ongoing review of the CPD provision at this forum.
- 5.9. An existing ASTI directive has prohibited members of the ASTI from accessing CPD to date. The Department will facilitate attendance by members of the ASTI at 'catch-up' CPD events and provides the following assurances:
- The Department will work with teachers and school leaders to facilitate the provision of 'catch-up' CPD, required for ASTI members teaching the revised Junior Cycle specifications for English, Science and Business
 - CPD will continue to be offered to school leaders and teachers who are members of the ASTI over the course of the phased implementation period
 - JCT will engage closely with the teacher unions to identify priority CPD needs which will inform the design and content of CPD provision for teachers who have not had an opportunity to attend CPD events to date.

6. Classroom-based Assessments (CBAs)

- 6.1. *Members of the ASTI are concerned that the implementation of classroom-based assessments signals an intention by the Department to move to the replacement of terminal examinations at junior cycle with classroom-based assessments which are marked in their entirety by subject teachers.*

The Department provides the following assurances:

- 6.2. One of the five immutable principles underpinning the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* is that the focus on one terminal examination as a means of assessing students should be reduced to facilitate the recognition of the wide range of learning achieved by students in schools.

- 6.3. There is no intention to phase out externally-assessed, state-certified examinations for junior cycle.
- 6.4. There is no requirement under the assessment provisions of the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* for teachers to assess their own students for State certification purposes. The assessment and reporting arrangements, which clearly delineate the internal and external assessment roles, have been deliberately designed to protect this principle.
- 6.5. The final written examinations in June of each year will continue to be administered and marked by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and provisional results of these examinations will continue to be issued by SEC in September each year. These results will incorporate the marks awarded by the SEC for the Assessment Task.
- 6.6. On the completion of Junior Cycle, the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) will offer parents/guardians a clear and broad picture of their child's learning journey over the three years of junior cycle. The JCPA is a report generated and issued by the school in the academic year following the student's completion of the Junior Cycle Programme. It will incorporate a copy of the student's finalised SEC grades and include reporting on a range of other school-based learning achieved by the student, including copies of descriptors previously issued in respect of the Classroom-Based Assessments.

7. Common-level subject specifications

- 7.1. *Members of the ASTI expressed concern that specifications at a common-level, leading to common-level examinations, would not be accessible to less able students.*
- 7.2. *Members of the ASTI have expressed concern that common-level subject specifications will result in the removal of more challenging tasks for students and will have implications for their readiness to take up some subjects for Leaving Certificate study.*
- 7.3. *Members of the ASTI have expressed concern that junior-cycle examination papers which are set at common levels will (a) not adequately challenge the better able student and (b) may not be accessible for less able students.*

The Department provides the following assurances:

- 7.4. Students mature at different rates. The provision of the subject specifications at a common level is intended to ensure that all students are treated fairly and impartially and that students are not required to make decisions regarding their subject levels at too early a stage of their post-primary education. Subject specifications will be framed so that opportunities for differentiation for students at either end of the ability spectrum are identified easily.
- 7.5. The common-level specifications for Science and for Business, and those specifications currently under development, reinforce the student-centred approach in the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*.
- 7.6. The use of differentiated questions, which can be answered competently by most students but also at a deeper level by some students, is part of the professional repertoire of teachers.

Such questions are used frequently in class, for homework assignments and for the setting of examinations.

- 7.7. Additional detail to support differentiation will be provided in the *Guidelines for Assessment* which accompany each specification.
- 7.8. Ensuring a continuum of learning for students from Junior Cycle through to Senior Cycle is an important consideration in the design of subject specifications, and the subject specifications at Junior Cycle must provide a suitable preparation to enable students to undertake study in related Senior Cycle subjects. The NCCA development groups that are responsible for the delineation of subject specifications for Junior Cycle subjects must ensure that specifications fulfil these requirements.
- 7.9. CPD for teachers of Science and Business, and of other subjects as they are phased in, will address the potential within the common-level specifications to ensure that students are well-prepared for study of the subject areas at senior cycle.
- 7.10. It is noted that the State Examinations Commission has significant experience in framing questions that are accessible to students across the ability spectrum. The SEC will develop and deliver common-level assessments for the new junior-cycle final examinations aimed at challenging and appropriately distinguishing between the performances of students across the achievement spectrum. In developing these assessments the SEC draws on international good practice in developing test structures and formats which maximise the capacity of the examinations to challenge and distinguish as appropriate within the scope of common-level examinations.

8. Oral assessments in Irish and other modern languages

- 8.1. *Members of the ASTI accept that the assessment of students' oral achievement should be an important element of the teaching, learning and assessment arrangements for Irish and other modern languages at Junior Cycle. However, ASTI members believe that oral assessments in these subjects should be conducted by the State Examinations Commission.*

The Department provides the following assurances:

- 8.2. The DES concurs that the assessment of oral achievement is an important element of the teaching, learning and assessment arrangements for Irish and other modern languages at Junior Cycle. This is recognised in the specifications for these subjects, where provision for assessment is made through ongoing formative assessment in the language learning classroom and through Classroom Based Assessments.
- 8.3. The Department has considered the request of ASTI that the assessment of oral language competence should be conducted by the State Examinations Commission (and notes that this request had been made by ASTI and TUI as part of previous discussions), but is unable to agree to the introduction of such a provision for a number of educational and practical reasons. For example, the Department believes that the normal classroom interactions of teaching and learning provide an authentic opportunity and suitable environment for the assessment of oral competence at the level of Junior Cycle, and it is noted that the SEC

already experiences considerable difficulties in recruiting sufficient examiners to conduct the necessary oral examinations at Leaving Certificate level.

9. Standardised testing

- 9.1. *Members of the ASTI have expressed concern about the use of standardised testing for certification purposes, in particular, that it is the Department's intention to move towards a reliance on standardised tests for certification and away from examinations as they currently exist.*

The Department provides the following assurances:

- 9.2. The use of Standardised Testing is not an element of the revised Junior Cycle.
- 9.3. While schools will continue to use various standardised tests for a range of diagnostic and other purposes, the outcomes of standardised tests will not be included as areas for reporting in the JCPA.
- 9.4. It is not the intention of the Department to introduce standardised tests for State certification purposes in either junior cycle or senior cycle. This recognises that all parties share a commitment to avoid any unintended narrowing of the curriculum experience for students.

10. Commitment to Ongoing and Future Review

- 10.1. In addition to the assurances provided above the Department is committed to keeping the implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* under review, in partnership with school leaders, teachers and other education partners.
- 10.2. The Implementation Committee, established under the *Junior Cycle Reform: Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation May 2015*, has met regularly and will continue to operate for the duration of the rollout and bedding down period of the new Junior Cycle reform. The Committee membership includes the Department, the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) and the ASTI, but ASTI has not been represented at meetings of the Committee to date. The purpose of the Committee is to consider implementation and interpretation issues related to the *Junior Cycle Reform: Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation May 2015* and in the related *Appendix to Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation July 2015*. The Department commits, through this Committee, to working closely with the ASTI and the TUI in seeking to address implementation concerns raised by the unions. The assurances provided in this document are consistent with the deliberations of the Implementation Committee.
- 10.3. Already, following discussion at the Implementation Committee, the NCCA has confirmed that a subject-specific review of English will commence in November 2017 and that provision for similar subject-specific reviews will be incorporated into each subject specification.
- 10.4. A longitudinal study of the implementation of Junior Cycle reform will be commissioned. This review will run concurrently with the phased implementation period to 2019 and will consider the overall impact on teaching and learning experiences and on student outcomes. It will make proposals for change where these are merited.

Concluded 29 November 2016
