

## Country Box A

# A brief history of public and private involvement in schools in Ireland

### OVERVIEW

In Ireland, the management of schools at second level is complex.<sup>1</sup> Virtually all second-level schools in Ireland were owned and controlled by religious entities until 1931. The establishment of Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) in 1931 (Government of Ireland, 1930) introduced a new and separate tier of vocational schooling. The introduction of free education in 1967 (Department of Education, 1966) occurred alongside rapid growth in participation in second-level education, and these developments, coupled with the fact that students in vocational schools could take the national examination, given after Grade 12, to obtain a Leaving Certificate, blurred the distinction between the education offered in privately owned and managed schools and vocational education. Community and comprehensive schools, which began appearing in the late 1960s, added other kinds of ownership arrangements to the education system, although they represent only a minority of schools at second level (Coolahan, 1981).

In popular discourse, “public education” became synonymous with education provided by schools in the free education scheme, while the term “private education” is frequently used to refer to second-level schools that charge tuition fees. In reality, most funding for second-level schools is provided by the Irish government. The only fully independent private schools are those providing courses on a commercial basis, and less than 1% of second-level students attend these types of schools ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)).

### TYPES OF SCHOOLS

The *publicly-aided second-level sector* is composed of *four types* of schools. All provide a common curriculum prescribed by the Department of Education and Skills, enter their students in the same national examinations, are subject to inspection and evaluation by the Department of Education and Skills, and are regulated by the requirements of the Education Act of 1998, the Education (Welfare) Act of 2001, and other relevant legislation. All schools are required to put a management board in place whose functions are prescribed by the Education Act of 1998.

Hence, regardless of the type of school, all schools are managed under similar regulations. If school management is defined on the basis of the composition of schools’ governing boards, then almost all second-level schools in Ireland would be classified as being privately managed; however, the authority of schools’ governing boards is limited by regulations, as described above, which are in the public domain.

- **Voluntary secondary schools** are privately owned and managed but can receive public funding provided they comply with certain regulations. Originally, most of these schools were founded and owned by religious organisations. More recently, the management of these schools is being transferred to trusts. These trusts (non-trading, not-for-profit limited companies with charitable status) are run by religious orders, but will eventually be transferred to lay people. Secondary schools are largely publicly funded on a per capita basis. During the 2010-11 school year, about 52% of the second-level student population attended. An unusual feature of the Irish education system is that a majority of schools in this sector are single-sex. For example, 41% of all students who participated in PISA 2009 were enrolled in single-sex secondary schools (46% of girls and 37% of boys). In addition, 15% of these schools (or 8% of all schools) charge tuition fees; some 7% of the second-level student population attend these schools. The main difference between secondary schools that charge fees and those that do not is that those that charge fees do not receive government funding for running costs, while those that do not charge fees participate in the free-education scheme and are eligible for a range of subsidies and grants. Whether they charge fees or not, all secondary schools receive public funding for teachers’ salaries, though schools that charge fees may employ additional teaching staff using funds from those fees.



- **Vocational schools** traditionally emphasised vocational and technical education and are administered by the Vocational Education Committees (VECs), which are statutory bodies set up under the Vocational Education Act of 1930. In the 1960s, they were permitted to offer a five-year cycle of course work to cover national examinations taken at both lower and upper second levels. The boards of management for these schools are sub-committees of the VEC. Membership of the boards includes VEC representatives and parent, teacher and community representatives. Vocational schools and community schools/colleges (see below) are 90% funded by the Department of Education and Skills through a block-grant system. About 33% of the student population attend vocational schools.
- **Comprehensive schools** were introduced in the late 1960s. They incorporated schools that were under Catholic or Protestant ownership, and the various denominations continue to manage the school as patrons or trustees. Composition depends on whether the school is under Catholic or Protestant trusteeship. Just 2% of the student population attend this type of school.
- **Community schools/colleges** are funded individually and directly by the Department of Education and Skills. Their facilities are open to the community and these schools provide adult education in addition to normal programmes of education at the second level. They are managed by boards of management representative of local interests, including VEC nominees, nominees of the religious authorities and teacher and parent representatives. Most board members are nominated by non-public authorities. There are three types of community schools/colleges: those formed as the result of amalgamations, usually with one or more voluntary secondary schools; those established in response to demand for a new school; or long-established vocational schools whose name was changed to include the words “community college”. The first two are not under VEC governance, while the third is. About 13% of second-level students in Ireland attend community schools/colleges.

There is a fifth category of second-level school: **private schools/colleges** are privately owned and managed. They receive no public funding and are not obliged to follow a set curriculum. Only six such schools exist, and less than 1% of the total second-level school population attends them. Most students who attend these schools do so to prepare for the Leaving Certificate (national examination at Grade 12) in order to gain the points required to enter a specific post-second-level course. About 13% of students in these schools are aged 15 and 16; 57% are aged 17 and 18; and 30% are over 18 years of age. To date, none of these schools has participated in PISA.

## FUNDING AND CLASSIFICATION WITHIN PISA

Within PISA, secondary schools that do not charge fees and one secondary school that does are classified as government-dependent private schools.<sup>2</sup> Seven secondary schools that charge fees are classified as government-independent private schools. All other school types are classified as public schools. Of all the schools in Ireland that participated in PISA 2009, 88% of funding for these schools was from public sources, 9% was from student fees, and the remainder from other sources. When considering only those schools that do not charge fees, these percentages are 93% and 3%, respectively.

## TARGETED FUNDING

Ireland does not provide funding directly to parents through vouchers, though allowances, such as those for school books and uniforms, and exemptions from examination fees, are available to low-income families ([www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie); [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie)). Funding targeted to disadvantaged students is administered at the school level through the School Support Programme (SSP), under Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (Department of Education and Science, 2005). The programme was introduced in order to streamline support programmes and ensure that the most disadvantaged schools benefit from a comprehensive range of supports. It covers both primary and second levels, and schools are eligible for the programme on the basis of the profile of their student population. Around 21% of second-level students are in the SSP. While an evaluation of the programme is ongoing ([www.erc.ie](http://www.erc.ie)), the SSP is not without its critics. For example, the method by which schools are assigned has been called into question. Some argue that a sliding scale, rather than a binary classification may be more appropriate (e.g. Sofroniou, Archer and Weir, 2004); others contend that the classification system may not go far enough in addressing the needs of disadvantaged students who are not enrolled in schools that participate in the programme (Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

## DIFFERENCES IN PERFORMANCE BY MANAGEMENT AND FUNDING

The following Table, PISA 2009 student reading scores and socio-economic background levels, by school type, Ireland, shows the average performance in reading and the average socio-economic background of students as measured by the *PISA index of economic, social and cultural status* (ESCS), by school type. The average reading scores closely mirror



average socio-economic index scores. The average reading score of students in vocational schools is 73 points lower than that of students in secondary schools that charge tuition fees; and their average position on the socio-economic index is just over one index point lower. Vocational schools also show the most variation in reading performance, as indicated by the standard deviation. Although similar regulations apply to all of these schools, there are large differences in their student populations.

### PISA 2009 student reading scores and socio-economic background levels, by school type, Ireland

Type	Reading				<i>PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS)</i>			
	Mean score		Standard deviation		Mean index		Standard deviation	
	Mean	S.E.	S.D.	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	S.D.	S.E.
Community and comprehensive	486.9	(7.75)	96.6	(4.04)	-0.094	(0.061)	0.859	(0.028)
Secondary – no fees	504.0	(4.04)	89.0	(2.37)	-0.003	(0.036)	0.866	(0.015)
Secondary – fee-paying	538.8	(9.42)	80.9	(4.48)	0.752	(0.164)	0.820	(0.076)
Vocational	465.6	(6.47)	102.9	(5.66)	-0.287	(0.044)	0.832	(0.018)



## References

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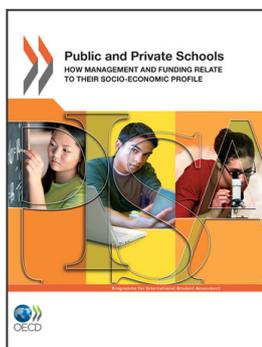
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Sofroniou, N., P. Archer and S. Weir (2004), "An analysis of the association between socioeconomic context, gender, and achievement", *Irish Journal of Education*, Vol. 35, pp. 58-72.

## Notes

1. "Second-level" schools in Ireland are those that offer education to students in grades 7 to 12, while "secondary" refers to voluntary secondary schools, one of the five types of school – in addition to community, comprehensive, vocational and private – at second level.

2. Government-dependent private schools are schools that receive 50% or more of their core funding (i.e. funding that supports the basic educational services of the institution) from government agencies. Government-independent private schools are schools that receive less than 50% of their core funding from government agencies.



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