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Presentation to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection

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Chair, Members of the Committee, the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) is delighted to have been invited here before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection to speak to you about the new Junior Cycle Programme and in particular Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). The IHRC was established under statute in 2000 to promote and protect the human rights of everyone in the State and as a direct product of the Good Friday Agreement. We are recognised as Ireland's National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) under the United Nations Paris Principles and as you may be aware, we will shortly merge with the Equality Authority to form the new enhanced Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

One of the Commission's functions is to monitor and review the State's compliance with its human rights obligations including education that strengthens human rights. The scope of human rights education in post-primary settings was examined by the IHRC in *Human Rights Education in Ireland – An Overview*, a report published in 2011 and launched by Ruairi Quinn T.D., Minister for Education and Skills. One of its main findings was that CSPE is by far the most explicit form of human rights education in the curriculum.

Firstly, the Commission would like to welcome certain aspects of the new Junior Cycle Programme including the introduction of portfolio-based assessment; greater choice with short courses; the human rights-oriented statements of learning and the focus on literacy. For such measures to work

there must be a clear implementation strategy, meaningful revision of subject syllabi, sufficient initial and in-service teacher training and subjects such as CSPE remaining state examinable.

The thrust of our presentation today concentrates on the proposed removal of CSPE as a compulsory state examinable subject to be replaced by a short course within the new Junior Cycle Programme. Currently, CSPE is the only explicit opportunity available to *every* student in Ireland to experience learning that equips them for what the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) describes as “a responsible life in a free society” as active participatory citizens. Consequently, the IHRC is of the view that CSPE should remain a compulsory state examinable subject, as it clearly demonstrates the Ireland’s compliance with its international obligations in this field. Efforts to mainstream human rights values in other subjects should be complementary and build on CSPE and not replace it.

The obligation for Ireland to provide human rights education is contained in a number of international human rights conventions to which Ireland is party, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the recently adopted UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training. Human rights education has itself come to be considered a human right. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that human rights education should provide information on human rights treaties and that children and young people should also learn about human rights by seeing and experiencing those standards implemented in practice, whether at home, in school or within the community.¹ The CSPE curriculum as it stands offers these opportunities.

Rationale

The rationale for retaining CSPE as a mandatory State-examinable subject can be set out under a number of principles. First, its retention as a mandatory subject would assist the State to demonstrate how it is meeting its obligations to provide education that strengthens human rights. It could form the cornerstone on which to integrate human rights into other subjects.

¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 1 on The Aims of Education”, CRC/GC/2001, para.1.

Second, CSPE promotes active citizenship based on human rights. A subject on citizenship has been a compulsory part of the post-primary curriculum since the then Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley T.D. introduced 'civics' in 1966. The subject has evolved since then to meet changes in society and how we view ourselves in the world. CSPE has its origins in the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995 to 2004) as is evidence in its stated aim: to provide students with the knowledge and skills for 'active participatory citizenship' based on human rights; enabling them to critically question, have empathy and engage with the world around them.² Academics have commented how CSPE is the only opportunity that all students have, irrespective of background, to experience learning that equips them as active participatory citizens.³ Research demonstrates that because of the Action Project component of CSPE, young people are engaging more with the world around them and human rights themes are some of the most popular topics addressed.⁴

The Task Force on Active Citizenship recommended the expansion of education for citizenship in the school system; more specifically to "strengthen the status and role of the CSPE programme in the junior cycle and introduce a citizenship programme as an exam subject at senior cycle".⁵ The re-designation of CSPE as non-compulsory means citizenship education would not be available to all students for the first time since 1966.

The positive impact of CSPE is revealed in international research. In an International Civic and Citizenship Study of 14 year olds across 38 countries, Ireland ranked 7th out of the countries studied, with its final score substantially ahead of the international average.⁶ This is owed in no small part to the fact that CSPE is mandatory and state examinable. This research is backed up with evidence from the United Kingdom (UK) that suggests that a strong citizenship education subject in the curriculum is the most effective way of promoting equality, human rights, democracy and social justice within the curriculum.⁷

² CSPE Syllabus : aims and objectives p.8

³ Wilson M. (2008) 'The Action Project as a Teaching/Learning Tool' in *Education for Citizenship and Diversity in Irish Contexts*. Eds. Gerry Jeffers and Una O'Connor. Dublin: IPA, p. 178

⁴ *Ibid.* , p. 182

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Kerr, D., & Losito, B. (2010). *ICCS 2009 International Report: Civic knowledge, attitudes and engagement among lower secondary school students in thirty-eight countries*. Amsterdam: IEA

⁷ Faulks, K 'Education for Citizenship in England's secondary schools: a critique of current principle and practice', *Journal of Education Policy*, Aug 2006

Third, CSPE supports responses to diversity in schools. Ireland is an increasingly diverse society⁸ and there has been an active response by successive Ministers of Education to promote diversity in education through the development of Traveller culture, intercultural and homophobic bullying guidelines. To quote one commentator, the CSPE curriculum provides the space for schools wishing “to respond positively and effectively to cultural and other forms of diversity, and in finding ways to help students develop into adult citizens of a truly intercultural society”.⁹

Fourth, CSPE provides a space to address sensitive issues. The IHRC considers that the active methodologies of CSPE, supplemented by continuous professional development, support teachers and students to address issues and confront attitudes and behaviours that conflict with human rights and equality principles.

Fifth, CSPE increases ‘political and social’ literacy. The emphasis on improving literacy in the new Junior Cycle is very welcome. We concur with the view that an important aspect of CSPE is that “acquiring a level of political literacy is key to accessing democratic society...[and]...to demystify political systems and to provide both the language and the skills needed for democratic participation”.¹⁰ The removal of CSPE as a compulsory subject could deprive students of the opportunity to develop strong political and social literacy.

CSPE is also a foundation for the new subject ‘Politics and Society’. The gap in the Senior Cycle for a subject that addresses philosophy, politics, democracy and human rights, equality, and global interdependence was finally addressed after more than 8 years of good consultation and deliberation with the development of the very exciting and much anticipated ‘Politics and Society’ subject. For example, science is the foundational subject for students in the Junior Cycle who wish to branch out in to biology, physics or chemistry in the Senior Cycle. From a humanities perspective, when you examine the curriculum of CSPE it is an important foundation for Politics & Society, regrettably not yet introduced due to lack of resources.

⁸ Gannon M., ‘Frameworks for responding to diversity in schools’ in *Education for Citizenship and Diversity in Irish Contexts*. Eds. Gerry Jeffers and Una O’Connor. Dublin: IPA, p. 124

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 139.

¹⁰ Harrison, C., and M. Wilson (2011) *CSPE Make a Difference: Teachers Resource Book*. 3rd Edition Dublin: Folens p.20

Sixth, CSPE is a vital contribution to the development of a whole-school approach. The IHRC considers that realisation of the full potential of the CSPE curriculum is supported by a whole-school approach. School councils and other such representative spaces give young people the opportunity to participate in decision-making and enables them to put into practice the principles of human rights and democracy fostered in the CSPE curriculum.

Finally, CSPE allows for the views of young people to be expressed, heard and taken into account, a key requirement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. When young people were consulted on the Junior Cycle reform, while they wanted CSPE to be restructured, taught differently and given more time, it, along with Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) were two of the subjects that young people considered should be compulsory at Junior Cycle.¹¹

Conclusion

The IHRC recommends that CSPE should remain as a compulsory State-examinable subject in the new Junior Cycle Programme. Ireland has an obligation under international human rights law to provide education on human rights to children in Ireland. At present, CSPE is the only component of the post-primary curriculum that explicitly meets Ireland's commitments in this regard. CSPE is also the only opportunity available to *every* student in Ireland to experience learning that equips them as active participatory citizens that will forge a more caring, rights respecting, equal and democratic society that we all aspire to. If the State proceeds to render the subject non-compulsory, it must be in a position to clearly demonstrate how it proposes to adequately meet its human rights obligations under the aforementioned conventions. In the absence of clear defensible evidence to this end, the State will be seen to be retreating from its commitments on human rights in this area.

Thank you for your attention. We are now pleased to take questions.

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27 November 2013

¹¹ Dáil na nÓg, NCCA, Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2011) *Report of a consultation with young people on reform of the Junior Cycle* Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs p.1