

**Remarks by Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn TD
at the launch of:**

Human Rights Education in Ireland – An Overview

Monday 4th July 2011 - Civil Offices, Wood Quay, Dublin

I am very pleased to be asked to launch this report on human rights education in Ireland undertaken by the Irish Human Rights Commission. Promoting human rights education is an important function of the Commission in its role as an independent statutory body charged with promoting and protecting human rights.

The study, the first of its kind in Ireland, provides important base line data for monitoring progress in advancing the human rights agenda in Ireland, and is one of the steps recommended by the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education.

This is the second major initiative by the IHRC in the field of education and human rights. The Commission's recent report on Religion and Education was completed in a very timely manner to inform the work of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the primary sector which I have established. The report rightly points to a range of issues which must be addressed to reflect the changing profile and parental choices of today's population, and to ensure that the rights of parents who wish their children to be

educated in different religions or none are fully respected in our schools.

The baseline study today is important in opening and continuing a dialogue on human rights issues in the education arena. My Department will examine the report with a view to taking forward its recommendations in the best possible way, commensurate with system priorities and overall resources and the realities of the budgetary situation in which we find ourselves.

The Report has rightly identified many areas of good practice in the system, with human rights education embedded at its strongest in primary and post primary schools, and to an extensive degree in higher education. This reflects the commitment of my Department to human rights education and I am pleased that our efforts are acknowledged in the report.

Specific areas of good practice outlined in the report include:

- the role of the school plan and whole school development in promoting equality and inclusion,
- the positive ethos which schools are encouraged to promote to underpin the values of Social Personal and Health Education and Civic Social and Political Education,

- the human rights values which form a central part of SPHE, CSPE, History, Geography, Science and Home Economics in the curriculum,
- the supports for professional development of teachers,
- the centres for human rights in higher education,
- and, the degree to which human rights education has been included in many higher education programmes in the field of law, politics, health and social science, and education.

We have also provided for students councils in second level schools, and for consultation with students as an integral part of whole school inspections, so that their voice and views feed into evaluations.

As you know, **Civic Social and Political Education** is a mandatory subject for all students in junior cycle, and one which is examined as part of the Junior Certificate. The assessment arrangements also provide for completion of an innovative action project which is designed to promote the skills of finding information, investigating a human rights or social responsibility issue, developing an action plan, implementing it, reflecting on and evaluating the experience and completing a report. These are vital skills in promoting

participatory democracy and the ability to challenge authority and promote change.

You may be aware that Ireland participated in the **International Civic and Citizenship Study** of 14 year olds across in 38 countries in 2009, co-ordinated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. It was undertaken in Ireland by the Educational Research Centre. With a mean score of 534, Ireland ranked 7th out of the countries in the study, with only Finland, Denmark, Korea, Chinese Tapei, Sweden and Poland gaining higher scores. This score was substantially ahead of the international average of 500. The results also showed that Ireland has significantly fewer students scoring below Level 1, as well as significantly more students scoring at the top level of achievement. Participation in voluntary groups (50%) and in human rights organisations (9%) was also in line with international averages. This was also the case for participation in debates at schools (66%) and participation in school decision making (38%).

There are also a number of other wider initiatives of recent years which have a role in the advancement of human rights in Ireland which have unfortunately not made it into the report. The most notable of these are the National Action Plan Against

Racism published in 2005 and the Intercultural Education Strategy published in 2010. The latter was developed following extensive consultations with key players in pre-school, primary, post primary, youth, NGOs, further education and higher education. It was also developed using evidence based data from ESRI, OECD, EU Green Paper Consultations on Migrant Education etc. and it developed a strategy that on inclusion, integration and the development of an intercultural learning environment.

This Government has identified a range of priorities which are designed to give practical effect to enhanced realisation of human rights. We are making literacy and numeracy a national cause, and I will be launching my Department's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in the coming days.

We are prioritising a programme of curriculum reform which is designed to strengthen students' learning and life chances and equip them for the challenges of a changing and complex world.

We are providing a range of measures to promote equality of opportunity, second chance education and training for those who are vulnerable, more effective provision for students with

disabilities, and strategic reform in higher education. We are seeking to promote a more pluralist education system which caters better for diverse needs.

I have also to prioritise literacy and numeracy, child protection, special needs, and language provision for migrants, and capital investment to ensure every child has a school place into the future, over reforming human rights education in the curriculum. These are areas which will have a very real impact in promoting our children's human rights.

Let me be clear that this should not be interpreted as giving a low priority to human rights, or indeed to human rights education. The report amply demonstrates that human rights values and human rights education are a strong feature of our education system, from primary through to higher education, and we are fulfilling our international obligations in this respect. As opportunities for further reform and consolidation arise, we will further strengthen these aspects of provision.

My officials and those in other Government Departments with responsibility for policy areas dealt with in the report will examine the document carefully. I will also discuss the report and its recommendations with my cabinet colleagues. I fully

recognise the importance of this baseline study and the vital role of the Commission in progressing and protecting human rights. It is well established that an effective education is one of the strongest levers we can have to promote democratic values, the capacity and skills to challenge authority and the collective means of ensuring a fair and just society. This work is very important, and we must take it forward in a way which takes full account of budgetary realities and overall system priorities and needs. Of course any discussion of public policy in the current climate must have regard for cost and the topic of this report is, unfortunately, no exception. Any new policy initiatives to be taken in response to the recommendation of the report must be cost-neutral.

We will examine carefully the recommendations in the report and see how the agenda can best be taken forward. We will also capitalise on new opportunities for reform as they arise, for example through new Transition Units and junior cycle reform.

I think we all share a commitment to creating a more just and equitable society. We are committed to ensuring that, in the overall prioritisation of public services, we continue to strengthen our education system and its role in promoting

justice and fairness, protecting the vulnerable, and developing the ability to challenge authority and campaign for change. I congratulate the Commission on this very impressive baseline study, and I look forward to working with you collaboratively in the period ahead.

Thank You