

Nature and evolution of different types of second level schools

There are currently four different models of second-level provision (outlined below), comprising Voluntary Secondary, Vocational (including Community Colleges), Community schools, and Comprehensive schools. All of these schools provide the programmes and courses prescribed by the Department of Education & Skills, enter their pupils for the same national examinations and are subject to inspection by the Department.

The evolution of the post primary system, as outlined briefly below, illustrates two key features:

- Within the 4 categories of existing post primary school types there is a degree of variation as particular school types have been adapted to meet local circumstances or the needs of particular areas (e.g. in order to reflect the religious composition of a particular community).
- Another significant feature of the post primary landscape is the fact that there has been significant pro-activity and intervention by the State in terms of 2nd level school provision dating back to the 1930s and the State is a significant provider of post primary education (in contrast to the primary sector where the State – through the VEC – has only recently become directly involved).

Voluntary Secondary Schools, which educate approximately 53% of second level students, are privately owned and managed. Most of these secondary schools are owned by religious congregations and are managed on their behalf by boards of management. However, about 40 are owned and managed by different Catholic dioceses, another 21 are owned and managed by Protestant groups while a small number are owned and managed by companies or individuals. Such schools are denominational in character and are generally Catholic or Protestant in ethos.¹ The last voluntary secondary school to be opened was in 1993 (other than through amalgamations of existing schools.) That school was established to address a particular enrolment difficulty in Limerick and has since closed.

The post primary ‘fee paying’ schools are encompassed within the Voluntary Secondary sector.

Vocational Schools, are administered by Vocational Education Committees (VEC).

The VEC is the legal patron of schools operating under the VECs. There are 2 groupings of schools in the VEC sector: the traditional VEC school and the ‘Designated’ Community College (see below).

The Vocational School model developed from the 1930 Vocational Education Act. This Act represented an early intervention by the State in the second level sector to complement existing provision (mainly undertaken by the religious orders) and to prepare pupils for the workplace by equipping them with appropriate vocational skills.

¹ There are 4 exceptions – 2 schools listed on DES website as inter denominational, 1 Quaker and 1 Jewish.

Although the number of these schools increased significantly between 1930 and 1960 (up from 98 schools to 272) the schools were very limited in terms of the curriculum they could provide.

Traditional VEC schools are non-denominational in their governance structures but provision is made for religious instruction.

The bipartite division of second-level provision between the Voluntary and VEC schools continued until the 1960s. The introduction of free education and the Government's aim of providing universal second level education resulted in the emergence of two alternative models of second-level provision (Comprehensive Schools and Community Schools) and an adaptation of the existing VEC model (Designated Community Colleges). The VEC sector was then able to expand significantly in terms of pupil numbers with the introduction firstly of the common Intermediate Certificate followed by the introduction of the common Leaving Certificate in all schools.

Together, Vocational schools and Community Colleges (see below) educate over 32% of all second level students. Of the 35 new second level schools established between 1992 and 2009 a total of 28 were under the patronage of VECs (14 Gaelcholaiste and 14 Community Colleges).

Comprehensive schools: the Comprehensive school model was established in the 1960s and represents another intervention by the State in the second level sector.

Comprehensive schools are managed by a Board of Management representative of the relevant religious authority, the local VEC and the Minister for Education & Skills. The Board is appointed by the Minister.

The motivation behind the emergence of the Comprehensive school model was the fact that there were still areas of the country in the 1960s where children did not have a Voluntary secondary school or Vocational school within easy reach so the intention was to provide for second-level education in areas that were not served by such schools. The State also wanted to support the provision of post primary education for the Protestant community. The Comprehensive schools combine the subjects and courses available in Secondary schools with courses that had traditionally been taught in Vocational or Technical schools.

The opening of Comprehensive schools was confined to the period 1966-1970. No new Comprehensive schools have been established since 1970, with the exception of a Protestant Comprehensive school that opened in 1987. Of the 14 Comprehensive schools recognised by the Department, 8 are categorised as inter-denominational, 5 as Protestant and 1 as Catholic.

Comprehensive and Community schools (below) together educate approximately 15% of the second level population.

Community schools are managed by Boards of Management representative of local interests. In the case of Community schools, trustees hold the property in trust for the Minister and are deemed to be the patron under the Education Act.

The Community school concept was outlined by the Department of Education in the late 1960s. The professed aim of the Department was to make free comprehensive type education, combining the academic style education of the traditional Secondary school and the practically orientated programme of the Vocational school, available to all children. Community Schools were intended to be larger units than those generally in existence and were to be formed either through the amalgamation of existing Voluntary secondary schools and Vocational schools in rural areas, or in the city through the development of new schools. The first Community schools opened their doors in 1972 and new schools in this sector continue to be recognised arising from amalgamations of existing schools. The most recent Community School to receive recognition was in 2011 when 3 existing schools amalgamated in County Kildare.

The patronage of the 79 Community schools recognised by the Department to date involves one or more Catholic patrons with a VEC patron. Under the existing Deeds of Trust for Community schools the schools are open on an equal basis to all children in the community. While under the Deed of Trust the Catholic Church authorities were granted specific concessions in relation to such as teaching posts for members of religious orders and paid Catholic chaplains the teaching of religion is effectively multi-denomination in that there is provision for the teaching of religion within the school day and that religious instruction is to be delivered in the faith of the pupils that attend.

Designated Community Colleges were developed in the late 1970s. To an extent this represented a response by the VEC sector to the challenges posed by the Community school model. In such Colleges the VEC is the sole patron, as with the Vocational Schools (non designated schools), but Colleges are ‘designated’ as being of a particular denomination due to the composition of the Board of Management (itself reflecting the local community) and the provision of other supports such as chaplaincy posts. In practice the Designated Colleges serve generally Catholic populations though suitable arrangements are made for members of other Religions in consultation with the appropriate authorities.

A unique variation within this category is a Community College in County Donegal where the Board of Management has a broad representation that reflects the diverse religious composition of the local community and consists of representatives from the Catholic Church, Protestant Churches and the Quaker community. This is one example of the flexibility of the existing school types to cater for diversity in particular communities.