

Leaving Cert system must be examined in more detail

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The annual release of Leaving Certificate results and CAO third-level places is a time full of hope and new beginnings. It is certainly a blessed relief from the daily diet of doom and gloom news stories to see the well-deserved delight of students who have achieved outstandingly impressive results.

I think a part of all of us hopes that these students, and all who have been through this rite of passage, will find opportunities and fulfilment commensurate with their abilities and talents, and be allowed in full measure to contribute to society in the future.

The overall pattern of solid results gives the lie to the distorted impression, fed by some dubious lifestyle surveys, of a generation of ecstasy-addled, binge-drinking young people in Ireland.

It is also a little reassuring that scholastic achievement across the range of abilities is so welcomed and valued in the public reaction to the results round.

Perhaps, however, we tend to move on too quickly from the heady excitement of results and college offers and settle in unreflectively to the next turn of the cycle.

This year, there was some comment on worryingly high failure rates in mathematics but, as before, we had a fairly spasmodic and unsatisfactory public debate, which rapidly faded from view.

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Perhaps the more general debate, especially about second-level education, does continue, but mainly via the educational establishment talking to each other.

That establishment, comprising the Department of Education and Science and the main teaching unions, is fairly statist and centralised in orientation, narrowing the terms of reference before we even begin.

Minister Noel Dempsey attracts criticism for flying kites, running with policy initiatives before the interminable consultation process which is the privilege of insiders in the partnership model of policy-making.

For the cosy consensus of policy specialists and interest groups, there is nothing more dangerous than a minister with ideas, but Dempsey should be given some credit. He seems to intuitively recognise that some provocative thinking is required.

He brings to mind the late John Kelly, who remarked on the necessity of occasionally giving sleeping dogs a good dig (metaphorically speaking), and there are dozing mutts aplenty in the Irish education system.

For example, the routine disparaging of private sector provision of education should be challenged. At this time of year, the usual targets are private colleges offering intensive Leaving Certificate courses, particularly for repeat students.

These are sniffily dismissed by teachers' unions as "grinds schools".

Never mind that students speak highly of the professionalism and commitment of their staff or that, more basically, they provide a service which is valued by students and parents.

They meet the market test.

It is not the fault of these colleges that the state has constructed a system whereby the Leaving Certificate is the key entry ticket to third-level education, nor that for so many a first attempt at this exam does not secure a college place, after 14 years of state-funded education.

Furthermore, the unintended, but predictable consequence of the abolition of third-level fees was that some parents were in a position to spend the freed-up funds on second level.

The notion that education is inevitably a matter of direct and exclusive state provision is bizarre in principle, and normal in Ireland. These private colleges are beyond the pale in terms of the policy process, being apparently somehow less elevated than the state-funded sector.

The instinctive antipathy to commercial activity amongst the educational establishment indicates a strange disconnect between them and the world as is experienced by everyone else, not least by their students.

Private provision is routinely criticised as failing the equity test. Why should people with more money be able to buy better or more education than those with less? In the first place, the assumption that all those who avail of private education do so without sacrifice is misplaced.

To take some perspective on this, in the historical context of Ireland's former economic underperformance, one of the few ways for parents to assure their children's economic future was to invest in education, and many sacrificed much in order to do just that.

The enormous efforts made by parents in difficult economic times is one of the untold stories of modern Ireland's evolution—the unrecognised counterpart to our self-congratulation about the quality of the education system. One aspect of equity is precisely to reward, or at least facilitate, such endeavours.

This is not to suggest that there is no equity problem here. Education is one of the keys to social mobility and most people would agree that it is not equitable that a child's life chances should be solely determined by the accident of their parents' wealth and/or willingness to sacrifice on their behalf.

One route around this is to consider a system of school vouchers, given by the state to parents in a low-income group to spend as they see fit on the school of their choice.

In such a model, resources follow the students, rather than being determined by administrative fiat. The aim is to separate, rationally but equitably, state funding from state provision of education.

There has been an incredibly lively debate in the United States for many years about the merits and demerits of such a system, and much experimentation with various models. It is the sort of debate and experimentation much needed in our own unthinkingly statist and centralist approach to education.

Another kite for Dempsey to fly, perhaps?

http://www.aidankane.net/writingsetc/2004_kane_leaving_cert.html