

Private Members' Business. - Junior Certificate Curriculum: Motion.

Wednesday, 29 May 1996

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Mr. Allen):   A number of important decisions were made by the Minister for Education on the status of history and geography. The status of history and geography will not change — they will remain part of the core curriculum at junior cycle. The status of history and geography has been enhanced by a number of measures [602] implemented by the Minister. They include the introduction of civic, social and political educational, CSPE, as a compulsory examinable core curriculum subject for all students at junior cycle from September 1997. CSPE has obvious links with history and geography. One of the four units of CSPE — our local community — allows for common areas of study with history and geography through the study of how that community develops over time, an analysis of local development issues and how the community reacts to these issues. This will give the breadth, balance, relevance and coherence enunciated in the White Paper.

The transition year programme is available to all second level pupils in all schools since 1994. It is expected that almost 29,000 pupils in 558 schools, 74 per cent of all schools, will follow the transition year programme in the next school year. The important role of history and geography in the transition year programme is highlighted in both the transition year guidelines and resource materials published by the Department of Education. It should be noted that where transition year participants subsequently elect to take history or geography at leaving certificate level, these students will have had an opportunity to study either or both subjects for six years at second level in addition to six years at primary level. The Evaluation of the Transition Year Programme (1994-1995), carried out by the inspectorate of the Department of Education, noted that many schools were providing pupils with as wide a range of learning experiences as possible. Excellent activity based learning projects involving history and geography were very much in evidence.

The development and expansion of the European studies programme, a cross curricular programme involving history and geography, has brought not only innovative approaches to teaching and learning but these approaches have [603] been transferred into the teaching programmes of history and geography right across the second level curriculum.

The Minister for Education has asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to advise her as a matter of urgency on how best to meet the competing demands of a very wide range of subjects for inclusion in the core curriculum at junior cycle level. There are the conflicting requirements of a broad and balanced curriculum and the need to avoid overcrowding it. In addition, some flexibility must be left to schools to develop their own curriculum in accordance with their own perceived needs and requirements. The NCCA, in making its recommendations, has been told that the study of history and geography is to be part of the core junior cycle curriculum.

I am surprised at the contradiction between the contributions of some of the opposition Deputies to this debate. On the one hand there was proper reference to the need to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the 21st century. On the other hand there was a reference to

the importance of a basic curriculum making a distinction between learning and technical knowledge. This seems to be a reversion to late 19th century and some 20th century thinking where a distinction was created between academic and vocational-technical education.

Mr. Martin:   I did not say that.

Mr. Allen:   This is not the way that many, if not most, of the OECD and other developed countries are developing their education system. The impact of new technology, globalisation of the labour markets and the changing nature of work organisations have led to an increased need for multiskilling and for young people to be well educated in the broadest sense, to be adaptable self-starters, problem solvers, able to adapt [604] to change and be familiar with new technologies. The thrust of the curriculum reforms in the White Paper is to ensure that 90 per cent of 18-year-olds will complete full second level education by the year 2,000 through the provision of an effective foundation of general education with a strengthened and expanded vocational orientation. The EU's White Paper on Education and Training has, among its five major objectives the encouragement of the acquisition of new knowledge, the combating of exclusion, including the need to promote social integration, and enhancement of employability and personal fulfilment for all our citizens.

Ireland's highly respected educational system is quite similar to that of most other countries in the Western World. It must bring on board the use of new technologies such as multimedia and the Internet which provide educationalists with new tools for teaching almost every new object.

Knowledge is seen as a vital component in maintaining and enhancing a country's competitiveness. The new technologies must be used critically and integrated with the learning process right across the curriculum from history to physics and from geography to mathematics, construction studies and business. The study of history and geography provides opportunities for pupils to develop the skills of researching, locating, storing and retrieving information.

This board general education system with a strong vocational orientation should and will continue. The curriculum must evolve. History and geography are evolving and must evolve. The syllabus for history and geography at leaving certificate level are under revision at present. I am confident that with all the various changes under way and the decision to maintain the status of history and geography in the junior cycle core curriculum, the position of history and geography in the broader [605] second level curriculum will be copper-fastened and expanded.