



Roadmap for scaling up local school community engagement to inform education policy making in Ireland

During the last decade, several OECD countries have been supporting citizen engagement in policy making to better respond to increasingly volatile environments and complex problems. In Ireland, this participative approach is embodied by the Government's strategy for embedding innovation in the Irish Public Service. The strategy puts citizens at the centre of innovation and involves them in the decision, design, and delivery processes.

Ireland has a strong tradition and culture of partnership models and stakeholder engagement in education policy making. However, a desire to explore new opportunities for school community engagement and how they could support existing national consultation processes contributed to the exploration of alternative forms of stakeholder engagement in education. A pilot by the Teaching Council of Ireland in 2019, "Bringing Education Alive for our Communities on a National Scale" (BEACONS), suggested there is scope for enhancing the dialogue between local, regional, and national stakeholders across the education system.

This situation prompted the Teaching Council in collaboration with a range of Government Departments, national agencies and stakeholders, to request assistance from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) for the project "Support to improve local community engagement in Ireland's education policy development".

Drawing from international examples, existing stakeholder engagement structures and practices in Ireland, the contributions of a wide range of education stakeholders, and a pilot exercise, this report proposes a model and roadmap for exploring the potential of school community engagement to further support policy making across the Irish education system.

This report was prepared by Solène Burtz and Marco Kools, with inputs from Barry Kenny and Paulo Santiago (OECD Secretariat). We are especially grateful for the collaboration with the Teaching Council, as well as the Department of Education and other education stakeholders who constituted the Project Working Group. We are thankful to the Burren College of Art and the Centre for Effective Services for facilitating and assessing the small-scale piloting exercise of school community engagement events across Ireland, and to the many students, parents, teachers, school leaders and other stakeholders who participated in these events. Finally, we are also thankful to Agota Kovacs and to the European Commission's DG REFORM for its support in the implementation of the project.

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Why a roadmap for scaling up a local school community engagement model in Ireland?

The increasing complexity of education systems and need to find solutions to uncertain and ambiguous problems have prompted politicians, policymakers, civil society organisations, and citizens to reflect on how collective public decisions should be taken in the 21st century (Burns and Köster, 2016^[1]). During the last decades, stakeholder and citizen engagement in policy making has taken on greater importance in the field of education across EU member states and OECD member countries. These participatory stakeholder engagement processes have the potential to deliver better policies, innovation, stronger democracies and increased trust (OECD, 2020^[2]; OECD, 2020^[3]; Schleicher, 2018^[4]; Council of Europe, 2023^[5]; Council of Europe, 2018^[6]). For this to happen, however, in many cases it is found necessary to further strengthen stakeholder engagement processes to ensure these indeed allow for capturing the experiences and collective intelligence that education stakeholders and citizens can offer (OECD, 2020^[2]; OECD, 2020^[3]; Blomkamp, 2022^[7]; Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing, 2017^[8]).

Against this backdrop, the Irish Government is prioritising citizen-centric innovation in decision-making, among others, through its “Making Innovation Real: Delivering Today, Shaping Tomorrow” strategy. This strategy aims to embed innovation in the Irish Public Service. It puts citizens and users at the centre of innovation and strives to keep them at the core of decision-making, design, and delivery processes (Government of Ireland, 2020^[9]). Similarly, in the field of education, the Government’s Department of Education 2019-2021 “Empowering through Learning” Statement of Strategy has aimed to intensify the relationships between education and the wider community, society and the economy. A variety of strategic actions supported the realisation of this goal, including the strengthening of the role of learners and parents in their engagement with Ireland’s education system (Department of Education and Skills, 2019^[10]). These efforts have been taken forward in subsequent strategies, including the Department of Education’s 2023-2025 Statement of Strategy which seeks to strengthen the participation of children and young people in decision-making through the development of participation strategies and practices (Department of Education, 2023^[11]).

The Irish education system is considered a high performer among OECD countries (OECD, 2019^[12]), with a respected teaching profession (OECD, 2020^[13]; Clarke and O’Doherty, 2021^[14]). The recent OECD Government at a Glance 2023 report showed that more than eight out of ten Irish people (84%) are satisfied with their education system, which is considerably above the OECD average (67%) (OECD, 2023^[15]). Ireland has a strong tradition and culture of partnership models and established stakeholder engagement in education policy making. In the context of the developments noted above, this tradition and culture has more recently fostered a consideration of how school community engagement could most effectively contribute to the country’s exploration of complementary forms of engagement in education (OECD, 2020^[16]). In addition, the evaluation findings of a pilot by the Teaching Council of Ireland in 2019, “Bringing Education Alive for our Communities On a National Scale” (BEACONS, see Annex C), suggested there is scope for enhancing the dialogue between local-, regional- and national stakeholders and through this support more inclusive, responsive and innovative policy design and implementation in the Irish education system.

These findings prompted the Teaching Council, the Department of Education and a number of partner departments/agencies¹ to request assistance from the European Commission’s Directorate-General for

¹ The other Irish education stakeholder bodies involved in the project include the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; the Ombudsman for Children’s Office; the National Parents’ Council; the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; the National Council for Special Education.

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Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM), to support the development of a model of local school community engagement that can strengthen education policy making and implementation in the Irish education system. This request laid the foundation for the project “Support to improve local community engagement in Ireland’s education policy development” funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument and implemented by the OECD in collaboration with the Teaching Council and DG REFORM. The objective of this project was to form a clear understanding of the purpose and role local school community engagement can play in strengthening Ireland’s education policy making and implementation processes. More specifically, the project aimed to:

- Provide advice on the systemic changes that would be required to act on the outcomes of the local school community engagements.
- Propose a local school community engagement model, with various possible entry points, based on international best practice and evidence developed through a pilot study.
- Develop an implementation roadmap and advice for Ireland to consider when planning the model’s future scale-up and implementation.

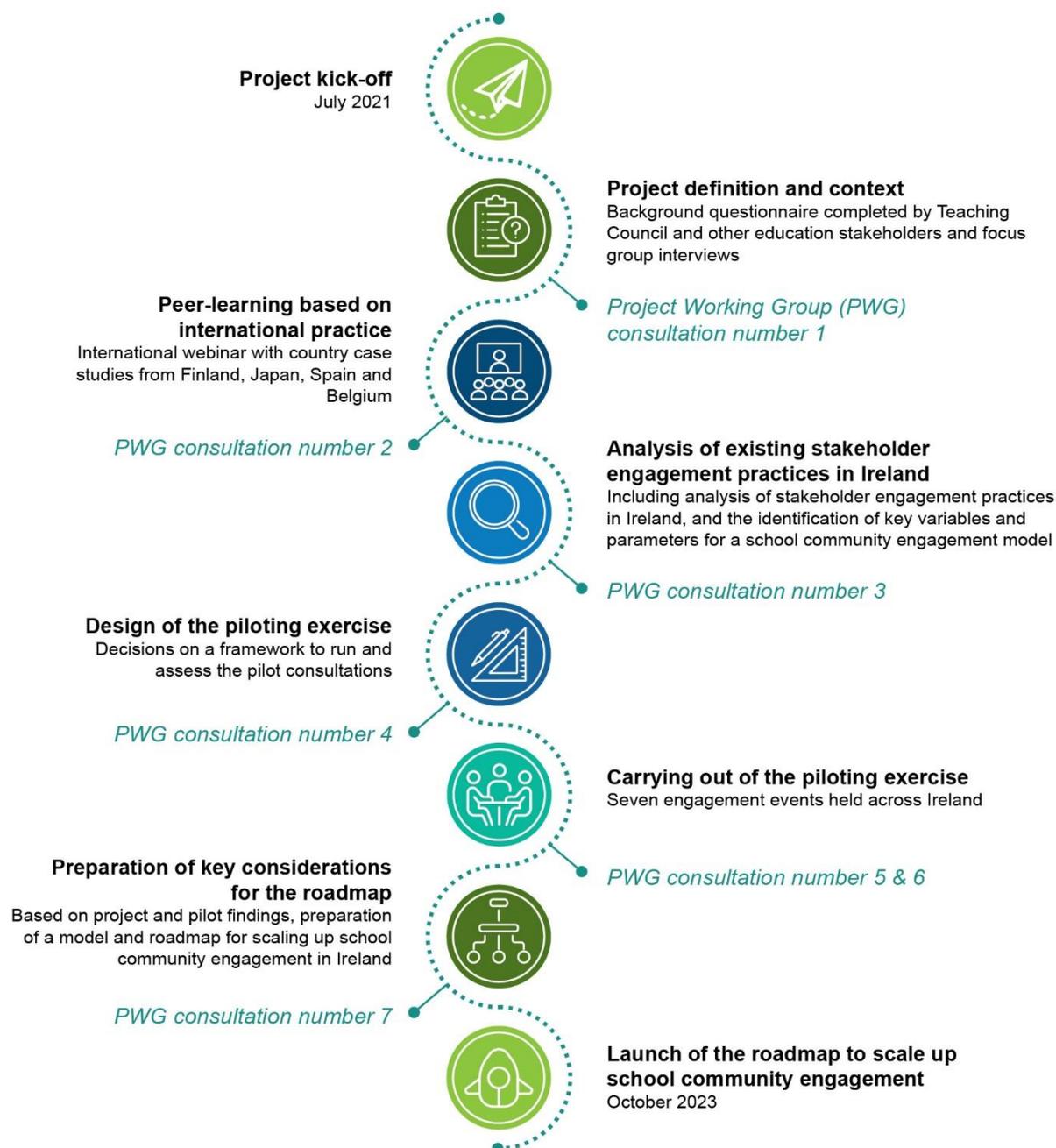
Early on in the project it was apparent to the OECD team that there were different understandings of the term “school community” among education stakeholders in Ireland. A definition was therefore developed in consultation with stakeholders to help ensure a common understanding of the term. We will elaborate on this in the text below, but in short, the school community was defined as “a flexible group with varying boundaries made up of people involved in teaching and learning with the common purpose of supporting children and young people to realise their potential over time.”

Overview of the project

The project “Support to improve local community engagement in Ireland’s education policy development” can be considered as innovative and investigative in nature. It centres around the exploration for a new school community engagement model to inform local and national level policy making. However, international research evidence on effective stakeholder engagement models and practices in the field of education (as well as in other public sectors) is relatively limited (Council of Europe, 2023^[5]; Williamson and Barrat, 2022^[17]). The project has responded to this limited evidence base – and aims to help expand it – by adopting an action research approach. The Teaching Council, the Department of Education and other education stakeholders in Ireland supported the notion that wide-scale experimentation is needed to find new solutions with a greater emphasis on decentralisation and on pausing to learn, explore, and experiment rather than simply act (Kerrissey and Edmondson, 2023^[18]).

The project was shaped through several activities, including a review of Irish stakeholder engagement practices in education policy making, an analysis of international examples, and a small-scale pilot of seven school community stakeholder engagement events across Ireland. Importantly, the strong involvement of key education stakeholders was key to the successful implementation of the project (Figure 1). A Project Working Group (PWG), consisting of representatives from Irish education organisations and networks served as a consultative platform throughout the project (see Annex A). These efforts resulted in a proposal for a local school community engagement model and considerations for scaling up the model across the Irish education system.

Figure 1. Overview of the project activities and outputs



The next section provides an overview of existing stakeholder engagement practices in Ireland. This is followed by a discussion on the challenges and opportunities for developing and embedding an inclusive school community engagement model in the Irish education system. This leads to the proposal for a voluntary and flexible local school community engagement model fitting the Irish context. The report concludes by presenting a roadmap for further consideration to scale the proposed model across the education system.

Existing education stakeholder engagement structures and processes

Irish stakeholders were adamant that a new model of local school community engagement should build on – and not duplicate – existing structures and processes. The project therefore started with an assessment of existing stakeholder engagement practices in Ireland through a desk study and focus group discussions with stakeholders from different layers of the Irish education system (see Annex B).

Identifying strengths and existing stakeholder engagement structures and processes in Ireland

The analysis showed that Ireland already has a strong tradition and culture of partnership models and statutory stakeholder engagement in education policymaking. In line with the Government’s aim to prioritise citizen-centric innovation in the public service (Government of Ireland, 2020^[9]), the Irish Department of Education (DE) regularly engages at the national level with representatives of stakeholder bodies, such as the Teaching Council, teacher unions, parent organisations and student groups and councils on specific policy matters and for shaping and implementing new policy initiatives and reforms. This well-established centralised approach ensures the representativeness of already identified players in the policy sphere, with structured opportunities to contribute to the dialogue and to the formulation of policy options. It is expected that the enactment of the Student and Parent Charter Bill (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023^[19]), which is currently moving through the legislative process, will strengthen the participation of children and young people and their parents in the development and implementation of school policies.

In addition, education stakeholders in Ireland have established several engagement structures and processes, for varying purposes and target groups (see Table 1). The Primary Education Forum for example was introduced in 2018 to support the planning and sequencing of change in primary schools. It gathers representatives from different national associations and bodies and serves as an exchange platform for education stakeholders to discuss the DE Action Plan for Education and its successor publication, the Forbairt Annual Statement of Priorities. It also aims to foster synergies and create opportunities for schools to streamline implementation of the Department’s strategic priorities, including addressing workload issues (Department of Education, 2021^[20]).

The OECD team found that in recent years several national bodies and agencies have challenged the traditional “top-down” approach to policy making by opening new arenas for stakeholder and citizen engagement, diversifying channels for input and funnelling new ideas. For example, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) conducted the Senior Cycle Review (between 2016-2021) for which it engaged with schools, students and various stakeholders through a rigorous process involving nationwide seminar series, consultation events, bilateral meetings, focus groups and public surveys (OECD, 2020^[16]). Another example is the consultative and collaborative nature of the “Leading Out” Seminar Series which was organised to support the development of the draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020^[21]). The NCCA has also established a Schools Forum involving approximately 60 schools that represent a diversity of contexts in Ireland. Every four to six weeks, teachers and practitioners meet to guide and help shape the primary curriculum review and redevelopment. On the one hand, the forum allows national level experts working on curriculum development to get insights and feedback from teachers and to learn from schools and pre-schools as sites of curriculum development. On the other hand, teachers learn about the curriculum review process, contribute to research on effective practice and benefit from working collaboratively on the development of the future curriculum (NCCA, 2021^[22]).

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) provides another example of enhancing stakeholder engagement for generating new ideas and policy solutions. The NCSE provides policy advice to the DE on special education matters. To support this work, it set out to diversify input channels by engaging a

range of key stakeholders. It established a Consultative Forum that serves as a consultative body to promote education that is inclusive, responsive and caters to the special education needs of children and adults. Its members (up to 17) include school practitioners, policy makers and representatives of relevant institutions, appointed by the NCSE and by the Minister for Education, and rotating every four years. Other recent NCSE initiatives have included a 2020 extended consultation survey that invited parents, students, people with disabilities and educators to share their views on ways to best educate students in special schools and classes (OECD, 2020^[23]).

Table 1. Overview of selected engagement practices in the Irish education system

Institution	Name	Purpose
Department of Education	Primary Education Forum	Support the planning and sequencing of change in the primary school sector
	Home-School Community Liaison	Promote partnership between parents, teachers and family support services to improve attendance, participation and retention
	Student Participation Unit (established in 2023)	Promote the participation of children and young people into the development of Department of Education policy
-Irish Primary Principals' Network -National Parents Council Primary -Department of Education	Partnership Schools Ireland	Involve the whole school community in planning and organising activities to better students' outcomes
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	Our Voices Our Schools	Support schools in listening to and involving young people in school decision-making
	Comhairle na nÓg	Involve children and young people of Ireland's 31 local authorities in the development of local services and policies
	Hub na nÓg	Develop a national participatory framework to involve young people in decision-making
Inspectorate (Department of Education)	Permanent ongoing consultations	Sustained engagement with education stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, parents, children and young people in the development of inspection policy, model and initiatives
	Promoting the participation of children, young people and parents in inspection	
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment	Permanent ongoing consultation	Generate policy advice through sustained engagement with education stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, parents, and children
	Schools Forum	Involve teachers/practitioners and schools/pre-schools as central agents in curriculum development
	Leading Out seminars	Support stakeholder organisations and schools to identify and agree on agreed pathways and action points regarding the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum
National Council for Special Education (NCSE)	Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO)	Provide support and advice to parents and guardians through a network of local professionals
	NCSE Consultative Forum	Engage with a range of professionals on special education matters
The Teaching Council	BEACONS	Strengthen school communities by facilitating conversations between local education stakeholders
Schools	Student councils	Representative structures for students in schools

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Institution	Name	Purpose
Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU)	Student councils	The national representative body for second-level students in Ireland to foster a stronger student voice at all levels of the system
Government of Ireland	Citizens' Assembly	(Prospective): Gather large feedback on specific matters across the education spectrum

Another example is provided by the Partnership Schools Ireland programme. This initiative is supported jointly by the Irish Primary Principals' Network and the National Parents Council Primary. It aims to strengthen the ties between schools and their communities to improve academic, social and behavioural outcomes for children, as well as boost the confidence of families to participate in education (National Parents Council Primary, Ireland, 2022^[24])

A final example is the earlier mentioned “Bringing Education Alive for our Communities On a National Scale” (BEACONS) initiative of the Irish Teaching Council which brings together diverse stakeholders locally to have conversations on issues of common interest (see Annex C). BEACONS aims to strengthen school communities by promoting and facilitating more conversations between teachers, parents and students engaged at the same time and space, and to create a supportive education ecosystem for both teaching and learning. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in Ireland (via its Public Service Innovation Fund) funded a pilot of six school community engagement events in 2019 to explore what use this approach may have in creating spaces for conversation at the school community level, and to inform or reflect on policy making at the national level (Teaching Council, 2021^[25]).

According to an evaluation of BEACONS these events were deemed successful in bringing people from a broad cross-section of the school community together in a non-adversarial way, surfacing key issues or themes across disparate stakeholder groups, and elucidating differences in perceptions from different groups. It was recognised there is scope to continue exploring and further developing the BEACONS approach to local school community engagement as a means for embedding systematic innovation in schools, enhancing understanding and bottom-up insights for policy development and implementation, fostering better relationships among stakeholders and links between schools and communities, and better utilisation of resources (Centre for Effective Services, 2019^[26]).

Challenges and opportunities to move towards an inclusive school community engagement model

While stakeholder engagement structures and processes are well-established in the Irish education system, several challenges remain. These include challenges in identifying effective policy solutions because of entrenched positions among stakeholder groups, the absence of some stakeholders (see below) from current engagement processes, and insufficient opportunities for local school communities to meaningfully inform education policy development at different levels of the system. Most focus group participants agreed that enhanced engagement with local school communities should complement and enrich existing approaches and highlighted the need to sustain and build on ongoing discussions between local and national levels, as equal partners.

As increasingly recognised in the literature and reiterated by Irish education stakeholders, there is room for and much to gain from listening more attentively to the voices of children and parents and guardians in education policy development (Council of Europe: Committee of Ministers, 2012^[27]; Beaudoin, 2013^[28]; Mitra, 2018^[29]; OECD, 2018^[30]; OECD, 2020^[31]; Jerome and Starkey, 2022^[32]; Whintrop et al., 2021^[33]). Where some groups are not represented the reasons for this should be further investigated. On this issue,

focus group participants noted that for many parents and guardians and other (potential) partners schools are often considered to be a “black box” whose functioning remains obscure. This creates a chicken-and-egg situation, where on the one hand the lack of understanding of the basic functioning of a school may create a barrier for stakeholders to engage. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence suggests that the lack of understanding of the school organisation and educational processes is also used as a justification for a narrow representation of stakeholders in school boards of management² that are often centred around school leaders, teachers and selected others. This is not withstanding the significant and ongoing developments driven at national level to enhance the engagement with school community members on many aspects of education policy and its implementation, including for example the Parent and Student Charter Bill (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023_[19]), and the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) as well as other developments noted earlier in this report.

Another issue raised by several focus group participants is the importance of a new local school community engagement model for creating a “safe space” for meaningful participation. The statutory nature of existing stakeholder engagement structures tends to focus discussions on the negative and on accountabilities, rather than on creating a space for open dialogue and jointly exploring solutions for improving schools and local school communities.

In addition, research evidence shows the potential of promoting collaboration with other schools as it benefits peer learning, the sharing of resources and school improvement efforts more generally (OECD, 2016_[34]; OECD, 2015_[35]). Although noteworthy initiatives are taking place locally in Ireland (e.g., through the Step-Up Initiative, Creative Clusters and Creative Schools, Schools Excellence Fund, the Small Schools action research project and the NCCA school networks) and digital technologies are facilitating collaborations, the focus group discussions confirmed there is considerable scope for strengthening school-to-school collaborations and networking in the Irish education system. Stakeholders pointed to several reasons for this, including the school funding model that depends on student enrolments and is believed to encourage competition, rather than collaboration between schools (OECD, 2020_[36]; OECD, 2017_[37]). In addition, collaborations tend to be more project-focused rather than systemic and do not necessarily provide scope for broader relationship building and collaborative professional development. The current school development planning processes and school leadership standards may also not yet provide enough incentives for schools to develop active partnerships with other schools. Given the high number of small schools in Ireland, there would seem much to gain from promoting further collaboration between schools.

Furthermore, as in many other OECD countries (Gouédard, Pont and Viennet, 2020_[38]; UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, OECD, 2021_[39]; OECD, 2022_[40]) significant efforts to utilise digital technologies were made in Ireland during the COVID 19 pandemic to compensate for school closures and to maintain in contact with students and their families. Education stakeholders noted the importance of building on these experiences by promoting the use of digital technologies in the local school community engagement model, as a way of involving people that are often harder to reach.

² Schools in Ireland are managed at the local level by boards of management, which are established by each founding patron, according to the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998_[68]). Boards of management are usually composed of direct nominees from the patron, the school principal, serving teacher(s), elected parents, and additional members from the wider community. They run on a voluntary basis, manage schools and hire teachers in line with policy, funding, curriculum and staffing frameworks approved by the Department of Education.

Linking local and national levels

While in many education systems, an intermediate institutional level, sometimes called the “meso-level”, ensures the connection between schools and the central administration (Burns and Köster, 2016^[1]; OECD, 2015^[35]), this is not well-established in Ireland. Focus group participants were wary about creating new structures and insisted on the importance of using or adapting existing structures and practices to support the implementation of the model.

Several existing bodies and structures were identified as possible options for consolidating key findings and recommendations from school community engagements and feeding these into national level policy. A first option is provided by the school boards of management. Although some stakeholders mentioned this option, many others were in fact against it. Individual schools in Ireland are governed and managed through their respective board of management (or management authority). However, the high number of these boards of management (around 4 000, roughly one for each school) challenges the desired aggregation and up flow of key findings and recommendations from the local to the national level. Certain stakeholders also noted their concerns about the variable capacity of school management bodies and shared their concerns that boards of management may be tempted to “filter” messages. In the Chief Inspector’s Report (2016-2020), the DE Inspectorate highlighted the need for boards of management to strengthen their communication with key stakeholders, particularly parents, regarding the planning and development of improvement priorities (Department of Education, 2022^[41]). To summarise, although stakeholders recognised that the boards of management should be included in the local stakeholder engagement processes, they were not considered best placed for moving key findings and recommendations from local school community engagement discussions within the system.

A second option, raised by many education stakeholders the OECD team interviewed, were the Education Support Centres and their umbrella organisation for the national network (Education Support Centres Ireland, ESCI). These regional-level statutory bodies (21 full-time and 9 part-time) aim to respond to the learning needs of teachers, school management and parents at the local, regional and national levels. The centres also organise after-school activities, learning support and training sessions and often provide spaces for teachers, parents, students and community groups to convene (ESCI, n.d.^[42]). They play a key role in fostering collaboration within and between school communities and were mentioned by many as a suitable partner for fulfilling this intermediary role. Participants noted that the involvement of the Education Support Centres in school community engagement processes could reinforce their intended use as centres for all partners in education as they benefit from an effective two-way communication process with local school communities and with other regional- and national level bodies. Several participants pointed to the high level of trust that these centres enjoy among Irish education stakeholders, partly due to their political neutrality, agility and responsiveness, as also demonstrated by their involvement in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and in assisting recently arrived Ukrainian families in securing school places. This arguably makes the Education Support Centres a good candidate to facilitate and embed the school community stakeholder engagement model in the Irish education system.

Similarly, several education stakeholders argued for considering the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The 16 ETBs are one of few regional-level education administrations in Ireland. Their representative body, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), represents a potential actor within the meso-level for consolidating key findings and recommendations to inform regional and national level policy making. Furthermore, in 2022 the DE established Regional Education and Language Teams (REALT) that build on the existing regional support structures through the ETBs to assist recently arrived Ukrainian families in securing school places and coordinate the provision of education services across their catchment area, among others (Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2022^[43]). Stakeholders argued that these teams had proven to be agile and well-integrated within the local context.

In sum, most stakeholders were positive towards the potential use of the Education Support Centres, ETBs and REALT teams for coordinating and facilitating local school community engagements and sharing the key findings and recommendations from these discussions with the national level.

Exploring the key parameters and variables of a new school community engagement model through a pilot exercise

The analysis of existing stakeholder engagement processes in Ireland and international examples, focus group discussions and inputs provided by the Project Working Group led to the identification of several key parameters and variables for a local school community engagement model. These variables were examined through a small-scale pilot exercise, consisting of seven school community engagement events organised between November 2022 and February 2023. This was done with the support of the Burren College of Art who were commissioned to coordinate and facilitate the school community stakeholder events and the Centre for Effective Services who assessed the pilot exercise (see Annex B).

Early in the project it was, as mentioned earlier, apparent to the OECD team that there were different understandings of the term “school community” among education stakeholders in Ireland.

The following definition of school community was therefore developed in consultation with the Project Working Group to help ensure a common understanding among all stakeholders and promote the inclusiveness of school community engagements:

A local school community is a group of people involved in teaching and learning with the common purpose of supporting children and young people to realise their potential over time. It is a flexible group with varying boundaries. At its core are a school building, students, parents, teachers, and school leaders. Special needs assistants, secretaries and caretakers also form part of the core group.

Other schools might also be considered part of the same school community. Organisations which play a key role in children and young people’s education might also be considered part of the school community. These include organisations addressing child and family needs (e.g. Tusla, or Barnardos in Ireland), those providing psychological support (e.g. National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in Ireland), public health services (e.g. Health Service Executive (HSE) in Ireland), or even sports, cultural and creative arts associations (e.g. Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in Ireland), as well as a local library or a local business.

This definition recognises that the readiness of some schools to engage with the broader school community may vary. Schools may prefer to start small and progressively expand their engagement, allowing for confidence and trust to grow towards greater inclusiveness.

In addition, and in line with the international literature (OECD, 2020^[2]; OECD, 2021^[44]; OECD, 2022^[45]), education stakeholders called for school community engagements to be meaningful through a clearly defined and communicated purpose.

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Responding to this, the purpose of the model was defined in consultation with the Project Working Group and is two-fold:

- *To facilitate and enhance the capacity of school communities to have inclusive conversations on issues of common interest, make sense of national policies in their context, and turn their shared understanding into agreed actions, and*
- *To contribute meaningfully to national policy development processes.*

This purpose statement implies that the model should bring benefits at both local- and national levels. The link to the national level was considered vital, as it can increase the perceived meaningfulness of participation in school community stakeholder engagements (OECD, 2020^[2]). Furthermore, defining the model's purpose also entails being clear about what it is not, such as an opportunity to address industrial relations and complaints against staff which are beyond the scope of the model.

The project design allowed for a small-scale piloting exercise that lasted five months. This meant that the linkages and contributions to local and national level policy making and planning could not be fully explored as part of this project. Further exploration of these linkages is needed for scaling up the model (see below).

Recognising this limitation of the project design, the small-scale pilot did allow – as intended – the exploration of key parameters and variables that could make up a school community engagement model. These for example included whether the topic of discussion for an event should be predefined with clear objectives or guiding questions; whether events should be held in-person or online; and their duration and timing; etc.

It is important to recognise that it was challenging to engage school communities in the pilot. This was mostly due to what several stakeholders referred to as the “busyness of the system”, including the daily demands placed on school leaders, students, parents and other stakeholders. Due to the great efforts and support provided by the Project Working Group, seven school community engagement events were held across Ireland. These events provided a wealth of information to help propose a school community engagement model fitting the Irish context.

Proposal for a voluntary and flexible local school community engagement model fitting the Irish context

The desk study analysis of Irish and international examples of stakeholder engagement practices, the small-scale piloting exercise and strong stakeholder involvement have resulted in a proposal for a school community engagement model for Ireland. Irish stakeholders stressed that any proposed model should not be mandatory for school communities, but instead should be flexible and voluntary in nature. The current section presents the guiding principles and underlying values of the proposed model, followed by steps to operationalise it in local school communities.

Guiding principles and values

The importance of inclusiveness and listening to students' voice

Regardless of the defined scope of the school community, there was a unanimous call among the Project Working Group and other stakeholders to ensure inclusiveness in the model. When engaging with school communities, specific attention should be paid to including those who tend to be more removed from education policy making and implementation, including but not limited to, traveller and immigrant

communities, and to students with special education needs, often referred to as the “hard to reach” community members.

Furthermore, students’ voice and agency were noted as particularly important for the school community engagement model. Students’ voice and agency have received growing attention among policy makers and educators in many EU member states and OECD member countries in the last decade (Council of Europe: Committee of Ministers, 2012^[27]; Beaudoin, 2013^[28]; Mitra, 2018^[29]; OECD, 2018^[30]; OECD, 2020^[31]; Jerome and Starkey, 2022^[32]). Ireland is among these countries, as evidenced for example by the DE Inspectorate’s commitment to enhance the participation of children and young people in the inspection process in early learning and care settings, primary and post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2023^[46]). Also, a Student Participation Unit was established in the Department of Education in 2023.

Another example is provided by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY) that, through the Hub na nÓg (i.e. the national centre of excellence and co-ordination on giving children and young people a voice in decision-making), developed a National Framework for Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making (Hub na nÓg, 2021^[47]; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015^[48]) (see Box 1). Stakeholders considered this framework vital to incorporate in Ireland’s school community engagement model.

A safe space for open dialogue

Another issue raised early in the project was the importance of creating a safe space for meaningful participation. Various members of the Project Working Group noted the nature of existing stakeholder engagement structures mean that all too often they tend to focus on the negative and accountabilities, rather than creating a safe space for open dialogue and jointly exploring solutions. Therefore, the proposed model should ensure a safe place for open discussions.

Importantly, the concept of a safe space should also apply to the creation of a safe and inclusive environment for children and young people to form and express their views (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015^[48]).

Purposeful and results-focused school community engagements

As mentioned earlier, the international literature points to the importance of having a clearly defined and communicated purpose for stakeholder engagement to be meaningful (OECD, 2020^[2]; OECD, 2021^[44]; OECD, 2022^[45]). This finding was supported by the Project Working Group and resulted in the formulation of the statement of purpose for the model. As described above, the model’s purpose highlights the importance of school community engagements feeding into local- and national level policy development processes, and (implicitly) calls for facilitating feedback loops between these levels.

Participants in the events were also adamant about the model needing to deliver tangible results, for example by enabling learning or relationship building and, importantly demonstrating that they have agency to contribute to changes in policy and practice at local and/or national levels (Centre for Effective Services, unpublished^[49]). These linkages and knowing that “someone is listening” as expressed in a participant interview, can increase involvement in the process (OECD, 2020^[2]).

However, expectations need to be managed on the potential of the national level to listen and respond to all findings and recommendations of local school community stakeholder engagements. For example, while DE officials and other national bodies may be able to attend school community engagement events as observers (as was also the case for several of this project’s pilot events), participation in all future events and follow up on all recommendations may not always be feasible.

Box 1. Children and young people's participation in Ireland's decision-making

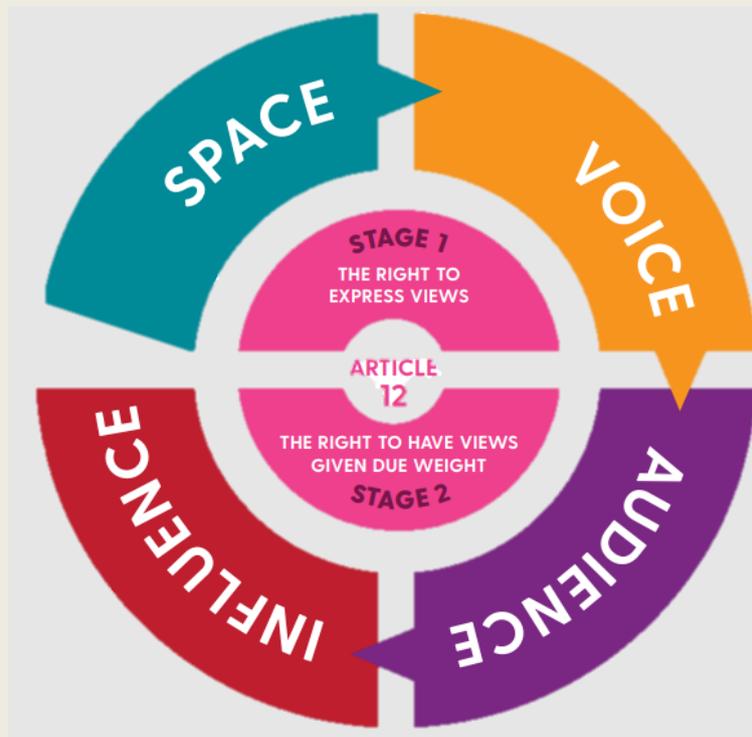
National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) developed a participation framework to support departments, agencies and organisations to listen to children and young people and give them a voice in decision-making. The Framework is underpinned by the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (2015-2020), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Framework aims to improve and establish mechanisms to i) ensure that seldom-heard and vulnerable children and young people are listened to and involved in decision-making and ii) mainstream the participation of children and young people in the development of policy, legislation, services and research. Developed in collaboration with Professor Laura Lundy, it focuses on children and young people's individual and collective participation in decision-making and provides a pathway made up of four elements:

SPACE, where children and young people must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views; VOICE, where children and young people must be facilitated to express their views; AUDIENCE, where the views must be listened to, and INFLUENCE where views must be acted upon, as appropriate (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Visualisation of the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making



Established in 2017 by DCEDIY, Hub na nÓg is the national centre of excellence and co-ordination on giving children and young people a voice in decision-making. It supports Government Departments, state agencies and non-government organisations to implement the national strategy. The centre provides training, advice and support to guide the use of the Lundy model and good practice principles in participation events. Developed materials include for example a planning checklist for the development phase, and evaluation checklist following the completion of events, guidance to professionals working with children every day and evaluation forms for children and young people to evaluate face-to-face and online meetings, consultations, surveys and other activities.

Source: Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015^[48]), *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making 2015-2020*, accessed 16 June 2023; Hub na nÓg (2021^[50]), *What is Hub na nÓg?*, <https://hubnanog.ie/what-is-hub-na-nog/> (accessed on 16 June 2023).

A voluntary and flexible engagement model

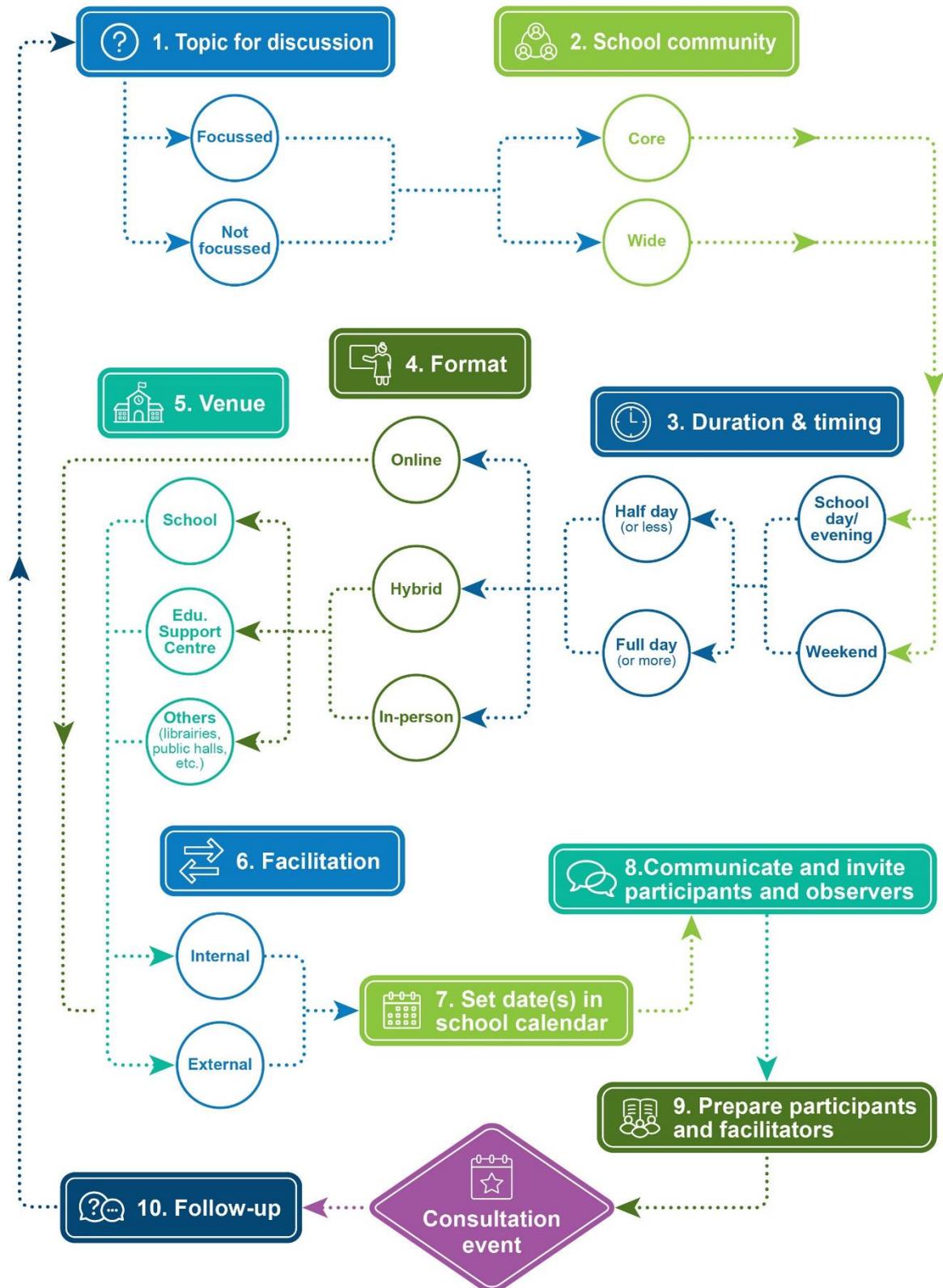
A key conclusion from the pilot exercise and stakeholder discussions was that the model should be voluntary in nature, with schools and their communities having the option to opt-in and not be expected to implement the model on a mandatory basis (Centre for Effective Services, unpublished^[49]).

These also pointed to the need for a flexible model that provides school communities with the necessary freedom and options to organise and shape discussions. A prescriptive one-size-fits all model was not deemed desirable. For example, while some school communities may prefer to have predefined topics of discussion as input for their stakeholder engagement events, others may prefer a more open discussion without a predefined focus. School communities' readiness was raised as a key parameter to ensure flexibility of the model.

A proposal for a school community engagement model

This section discusses and visualises the proposal for a local school community engagement model for Ireland to further examine and refine. It aims to guide the reader through the steps and actions, including a menu of options, for putting the model into practice. The model is illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 3. Illustration of the proposed local school community engagement model



Step 1: Decide on the topic and scope of school community events

The literature shows the benefits of having predefined topics of discussion and/or guiding questions to guide stakeholder engagement (OECD, 2020^[2]; OECD, 2022^[45]) as is done in international stakeholder engagement models such as the Japanese Community Schools (see Annex C, Box 3) and the Barcelona Youth Forum (see Annex C, Box 4). One clear benefit of having predefined objectives and/or guiding questions is that these make it easier to collect and analyse the findings and recommendations of local school community engagements to inform policy making and planning at the national level. The objectives and/or guiding questions could for example be predefined by a small group of members of the school community (e.g. school principals, teachers, students, parents) or could be defined at the national level as will be elaborated on below.

Several education stakeholders however also noted the importance of giving schools the option to not use predefined objectives and/or questions to guide discussions as this would allow for the emergence of (other) issues and challenges of relevance to the school community. Although framed within three themes (excellence, inclusion, and well-being), discussions in the French Let's Make School Together initiative for example allow school communities to identify challenges and solutions that fit their local context (see Annex C, Box 5).

Such flexibility could allow for the model to accommodate a diversity of contexts and needs. Some stakeholders noted that the decision to have no predefined focus may in particular benefit school communities with no or little school community engagement and rather help develop a safe space and build trust and confidence. The findings from the pilot exercise corroborated these views (Centre for Effective Services, unpublished^[49])

The proposed model therefore allows school communities to choose between two options:

Option 1:

School community engagements have predefined focus areas (e.g. the sustainability of small schools, ensuring inclusivity in school, improving student well-being, or supporting literacy and numeracy in the school community) and/or have guiding questions (e.g. how to implement the Junior Cycle curriculum or how to enhance teaching and learning). These could be defined by members of the local school community themselves. Alternatively, school communities could choose to adopt and base their discussions on the objectives and/or guiding questions defined at the national level (see recommendations in the Roadmap section).

Option 2:

School community engagements do not have a predefined focus to guide discussions. This means that stakeholders are encouraged to openly discuss issues relevant to them. General prompts or focus areas (such as inclusion or well-being) could be given to participants to generate discussions.

In both cases discussions should be organic and give an equal opportunity for all to participate. This argues for skilled facilitation, which will be discussed further in step 6.

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Step 2: Decide on the duration, timing and frequency of the school community engagements

Having defined the focus or open nature of the engagements, school communities decide on their duration, timing and frequency. The findings from the project did not show a clear preference for the timing and duration of school community engagements. The pilot tested full-day events (over four hours and with a lunch break), and half-day or shorter events (three hours and under). Most participants at full-day events were pleased with the duration, while others suggested even more time for discussions would be useful. Similar findings emerged from the half-day events and the online events (that lasted about 2 hours). Generally, building in time for breaks and informal conversations and breakout sessions was believed beneficial for fostering positive relationships between participants (Centre for Effective Services, unpublished^[49]).

While it was impossible to identify a preferred duration for the school community engagement events, the evidence suggested that the readiness of schools is a factor for consideration. Schools organising an event for the first time may wish to consider a longer stakeholder engagement event (e.g. a full day). Where school communities have already organised events and a trusting relationship has been established, engagements of shorter duration may be preferred.

Regarding the timing, the option of organising school community engagements in the evening hours or during the weekend was found to be less appealing in the pilot. Despite attempts to organise one or more school community engagements events during the weekend, school communities showed little interest in this option. As a result, none of the events were scheduled at the weekend.

Stakeholder engagements during the working week and school hours allow for the participation of students and teachers. However, these may have an impact on teaching time and may require substitution cover for participating teachers. This option may also exclude some parents and other community members due to work and/or family obligations. There is no clear or easy solution to this dilemma.

The Project Working Group suggested giving schools the freedom to decide on the timing (and frequency) of school community engagements. The proposed model therefore provides two basic options for school communities to choose from either a full-day school community engagement (or longer), or a half-day (or shorter) engagement. Within this context, as indicated in the next step, schools who wish to consider the model should retain the option to look at other timing arrangements that maximise the inclusivity of the process.

Although beyond the scope of this project, some stakeholders noted the option of having as many as two or three school community engagement events during the school year to cater for wider participation. However, whether such a frequency is feasible in terms of the interest of school communities, and sustainable considering the human and financial resources involved is an issue for careful investigation (see recommendations in the roadmap section).

Step 3: Choose the format that fits the school community context

The project piloted both in-person and online formats for the seven school community engagement events. In general, both formats were positively perceived by participants. That said, some stakeholders noted their preference for meeting in person because of the benefits this brings in terms of informal interactions among participants and for building trust and confidence which are considered vital for ensuring meaningful and open discussions for exploring innovative solutions (Centre for Effective Services, unpublished^[49]). However, the disadvantages of in-person stakeholder engagements include the costs and other resources involved for example for the venue, catering and transportation. These costs should be considered for the

potential scale up of the model across the Irish school system (see recommendations in the roadmap section).

The evidence shows the potential of engaging a broader range of stakeholders by also offering an online format, including those traditionally hard-to-reach groups, such as working parents, those with an immigrant background or those living in remote areas (OECD, 2020^[2]). School communities could also opt for a hybrid format, which was also tested as part of the pilot (see Annex B).

Again the readiness of a school community may be a factor influencing the choice of format(s). School communities that have already gained the necessary experience with school community engagements and/or benefit from strong, trusting relationships and among stakeholders may feel (more) comfortable choosing an online format.

School communities may opt for combining different formats during the school year. For example, a school community that has decided to discuss a complex issue (e.g. student well-being) may decide to organise an in-person or hybrid engagement, shortly after followed by an online event to present and receive feedback on the key findings and recommendations of the in-person event before actioning these. In sum, the model allows school communities to decide on the format(s) that best fit their local contexts.

Step 4: Find a venue for in-person or hybrid school community engagement events

For the school communities that have chosen an in-person or hybrid format, the next step is to identify a suitable venue to accommodate participants. The project held pilot events in different venues, including hotels, an education support centre, a university campus and an Arts centre. However, the evaluation of the pilot exercise did not suggest a clear preference for any of these options. Although the piloting revealed that some students seemed to enjoy the time out of school, others seemed to enjoy gathering at their school to participate in the event (Centre for Effective Services, unpublished^[49]).

That said, discussions with various stakeholders revealed concerns about the affordability of scaling the school community model in fee-paying venues, while pointing to the opportunities of using existing public facilities. A first option to consider for keeping costs low is to organise the engagement events in one of the participating schools. However, it is important to recognise that not all schools are equipped with the space and logistics to accommodate large groups. As discussed earlier, schools are for some parents considered a “black box” and this could be an obstacle to their participation.

Several stakeholders noted the option of using other public facilities such as those offered by community centres, libraries, public halls, universities, community spaces and Education Support Centres (although these may charge a small fee). These facilities are likely to be well known to many members of the school community which was believed to positively impact on people’s willingness to participate.

Step 5: Ensure skilled facilitation

The school community engagements that were part of this project’s pilot exercise relied on a small team of external, independent facilitators from the Burren College of Art. However, for the model to be scaled up, it is likely to be necessary to identify and train a pool of skilled facilitators that can support the delivery of school community engagement events across the country (Centre for Effective Services, unpublished^[49]).

First, participants in this project noted the benefits of having independent facilitators (who are not part of the school community), as this could allow for more open discussions. Independent facilitators may for example come from universities, non-governmental organisations or private companies. Several stakeholders noted their concerns about this option likely being (more) costly.

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Second, as will be further explored below, there is the option of using the capacity in existing (regional level) structures such as the Education Support Centres, the Education and Training Boards and REALT teams to help facilitate school community engagements and establish the connections between local, regional and national levels. Current and former advisors (seconded experienced teachers) working with the teacher education support services could for example be utilised as facilitators with likely minimal training and upskilling needed. The role of students as peer facilitators could also be considered.

Lastly, the evaluation of the pilot identified the option of using school principals or teachers as facilitators, although attention should be paid to ensuring their independence from the school community (Centre for Effective Services, unpublished^[49]). They could be trained to take on the role of facilitator with the support of a range of resources such as facilitation guidelines and tools. This option is for example used in France for the implementation of the “Let’s Make School Together” initiative (see Annex C, Box 5).

To support school communities in deciding between these options and allow for scaling up of the proposed school community engagement model, the DE should, in consultation with other Government Departments, relevant agencies and stakeholders, consider the most effective options to support the identification and training of an appropriate number of skilled facilitators. We will return to this issue in the roadmap section below.

Step 6: Place the school community engagement event(s) in the school calendar

The piloting of the school community engagements highlighted the need for appropriate planning to ensure stakeholder events are added to the school calendar in a timely manner. Recognising the busyness of schools and the system, this step requires appropriate planning and preparation. School communities could consider integrating the stakeholder engagement events as part of existing school activities (e.g. School open days, parents meetings, STEM week, Safer Internet Day, Croke Park Hours, etc.).

Step 7: Communicate with and invite participants

Effective communication can be a mechanism for the broader public to learn about an issue, as well as to encourage further participation in public life. It increases opportunities for public learning and encourages greater participation (OECD, 2020^[2]; OECD, 2021^[51]; Suiter and Fletcher, 2020^[52]), in this case participation in school community engagements. Once the date, timing and possible location of the school community engagements events are decided on, it is important to reach out to the members of the school community in a timely manner. As mentioned above, some schools may prefer to start small and expand the engagement with the broader school community over time, allowing for confidence and trust to grow and work towards greater inclusiveness.

Using multiple means of communication (e.g. the school website, school apps, email, phone, radio, websites and social media accounts of local libraries and community organisations) schools should reach out and invite their local communities and share with key information on the stakeholder engagement event (e.g. the purpose, time and location of the event, etc.). This includes providing participants with information on Ireland’s school community engagement model (i.e. its purpose, how it is operationalised, etc.).

As was also evident from the pilot, Education Support Centres and/or Education and Training Boards could greatly support schools in inviting and sharing information with community members. As mentioned earlier, the REALT teams have demonstrated the potential to take on an active co-ordination role within school communities. Such a structure could be instructive in considering how best to support local organisation of school community engagements.

Step 8: Invest in the preparation of participants and facilitators

International examples and several stakeholders in Ireland pointed to the importance of information sharing or including a “learning component” in the school community engagement model as these can greatly help participants take informed decisions (OECD, 2020^[2]). The Finnish Experimental Lab for example has built “learning days” within its model, which provide opportunities for participants to share learnings with each other, get expert advice and engage in dialogue around selected themes (see Annex C, Box 6).

The sharing of information or inclusion of a learning component in school community engagements is arguably particularly relevant for the focused school community engagements that are shaped around predefined objectives and/or guiding questions. For example, if focused on the objective of “strengthening the transition of students from pre-primary to primary schools” then a knowledge of current policies and practices, and of how things are working in practice would aid participation.

However, also for school community engagements that have no predefined focus, it may be informative for students, parents and other members of the school community to know what school improvement efforts have been undertaken recently and what other actions may be considered for the coming months and years.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, it is vital that students’ voices have a very prominent place in the school community engagement discussions and help shape concrete recommendations for action. This calls for the use of the Participation Framework, which is underpinned by the Lundy model of participation (see Figure 1), and/or access the support of the Hub na nÓg³ in the facilitation process. Although the training of all participants in the Lundy model may not be feasible in the short-term, efforts should be made to increase awareness of children’s rights to information and participation in decision-making (United Nations, 1989^[53]).

Step 9: Hold the engagement event

After all the preparations have been made, school communities are ready to engage in the actual stakeholder events. Experience from the project and those of earlier school community engagement events (Centre for Effective Services, 2019^[26]) have shown that organisers and facilitators should make sure that materials and activities are delivered in plain language and allow all to participate in a meaningful way (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015^[48]; Beaudoin, 2013^[28]; Council of Europe: Committee of Ministers, 2012^[27]).

Appropriate facilitation and preparation (see Steps 5 and 8) should help maximise the agency of all participants. Establishing and confirming trust should be a priority for the organisers and facilitators. There is scope for further building on the example of BEACONS (see Annex B) which has developed a variety of facilitation methods that aim to instil trust and open conversations. The evaluation of the pilot events also showed that opportunities for informal conversations (during breaks at the events for example) were often highlighted as beneficial for the building of relationships and trust.

The use of online technologies can help increase and enable participation. Digital, interactive communication tools could allow for real-time written contributions from participants, both in online and in-person engagement events. Such digital tools may be particularly beneficial to those participants that are less inclined to speak up. It is important however to ensure that alternative communication means are offered to those who lack the skills to use the digital tools offered (OECD, 2022^[45]).

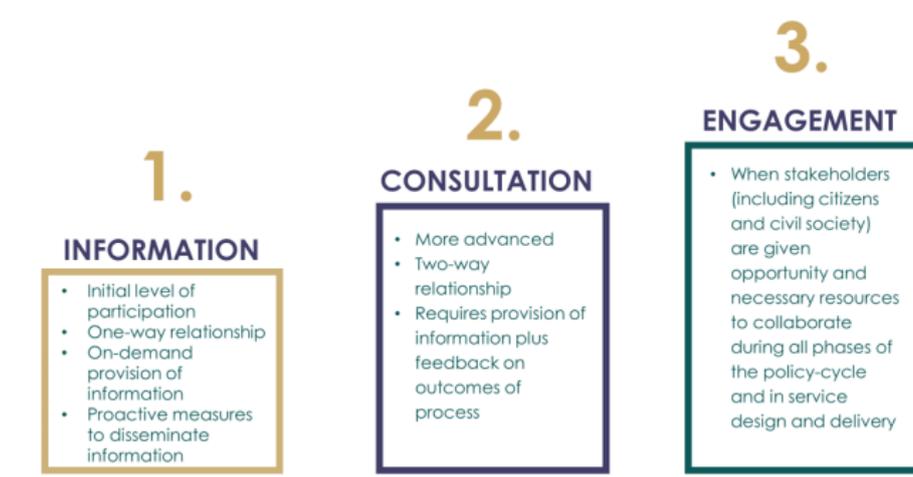
³ The National Centre of Excellence and coordination on giving children and young people a voice in decision-making.

Finally, the school community engagement events should be fun and enjoyable for all participants. Good facilitation and process design should emphasise cohesion, kindness, inclusion and compassion (Council of Europe, 2023^[5]). This is essential for the opt-in engagement model to be meaningful and embraced by school communities across Ireland.

Step 10: Provide regular feedback on actions

The evaluation findings from the pilot showed that participants appreciated the opportunity to meet and jointly reflect on key issues affecting their local school community (Centre for Effective Services, unpublished^[49]). Many participants also noted the expectation that the discussions would result in action and tangible results – so moving from “consultation” to actual “stakeholder engagement” (see Figure 3). These views were reiterated by the Project Working Group. The proposed school community engagement model aims to respond to this call for action by emphasising the need for action at local- and national levels, including by embedding it in existing structures.

Figure 4. Three levels of stakeholder participation



Source: OECD (2022^[54]) “Engaging citizens in cohesion policy: DG REGIO and OECD pilot project final report”, *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 50, <https://doi.org/10.1787/486e5a88-en>.

After the engagement event, it is vital that the key findings and recommendations for action are consolidated and disseminated to all the participants as soon as possible. Ideally the communication is targeted to the needs of children and young people and to those of adults, for example, through different versions. Updates on progress made could help sustain and expand the willingness and commitment of the school community to participate in future engagement events and generate support for the implementation of agreed actions.

Another mechanism to explore for embedding the school community engagement model in current structures is to feed into the yearly school self-evaluation and improvement planning process (SSE). School communities that organise stakeholder engagements events could use the findings and recommendations to inform their SSE and planning process. This would help ensure that improvement efforts are geared towards the realisation of actions that have been agreed upon by the school community, thereby further strengthening the connections between the school and the local community (see roadmap section of the report below).

School leaders could consider how the model of school community engagement could enhance communications between parents, teachers and students to strengthen home-school connections and enhance the quality of students' learning experience over time.

A growing number of international examples also show the potential of consolidating the key findings and recommendations stemming from the local level to inform decision-making at regional and national levels, while facilitating feedback loops between these levels (OECD, 2022^[54]; OECD, 2020^[2]). As mentioned earlier, the exploration of these linkages was beyond the scope of this project, but considering the purpose of the proposed model, they are vital for scaling up the model in school communities across Ireland.

Roadmap for scaling up local school community engagement in Ireland

Building on the lessons learnt from this project, the OECD team proposes that the model be further developed through a large(r)-scale pilot and over a longer period. This would allow Ireland to optimise and ensure its effectiveness. This section presents a roadmap for a development phase for Ireland to consider when planning for the model's scale-up. It consists of five related areas for action that are discussed below (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Five areas for action for scaling up school community engagement in Ireland



Area for Action 1: Adopt a phased approach to scaling school community engagement in Ireland

As an overarching principle, the OECD team recommends that the model be further developed and examined in a phased and action-research based approach. The experience and findings from this project could be used in the Irish education system in the coming years. That said, some unanswered questions and issues that have emerged from the project should be further explored before deciding on a possible nationwide scale-up of the model.

First, a preparation phase could rely on lessons learnt to identify and train a sufficient number of facilitators (see area for action 2), formulate and implement a comprehensive communication strategy (see area for action 3), and identify and mobilise adequate resourcing (see area for action 4).

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After completing all preparations, Ireland should consider moving forward with the progressive piloting of the model – in a yet to be determined number of school communities. This second phase could consist of a two- to three-year pilot that would give some school communities the opportunity to explore the model's usefulness and purpose.

This pilot should be supported with systematic monitoring and a rigorous evaluation to examine the effectiveness and sustainability of the model. The evaluation may for example look into the actual uptake or adoption of the model by school communities, the chosen formats of engagement, their costs and cost-effectiveness, their influence on policy making, and the model's potential for moving beyond consultation to actual stakeholder engagement (see Figure 3).

This may seem obvious, but research evidence shows that all too often the evaluation of new education policies and programmes is overlooked, and/or little time and resources are devoted to these (OECD, 2015^[55]). Also, evaluations of stakeholder engagement initiatives have often been light touch and uncritical (Council of Europe, 2023^[5]). This third phase is therefore key for drawing the necessary lessons from the development of the model and implications for next steps. Ireland may look towards OECD's Evaluation Guidelines for Representative Deliberative Processes (2021^[44]) for shaping the evaluation.

Recommendations

- Building on the findings of this project, Ireland should adopt a phased and action research-based approach to further develop local school community engagement in the Irish education system.
 - Following a preparation phase, the model could be further developed through a two to three-year pilot that would give a yet to be determined number of school communities the opportunity to explore the model's usefulness and purpose.
 - This pilot should be supported with systematic monitoring and a rigorous evaluation to examine the effectiveness and sustainability of the model.

Area for Action 2: Invest in the capacity development of sufficient numbers of facilitators

A key element to successful policy implementation is ensuring appropriate capacity. This includes having the knowledge and understanding of the policy and purpose(s) it sets out to achieve, the ownership and willingness to make the change, and the skills and resources to implement it (Burns and Köster, 2016^[1]; OECD, 2021^[56]; OECD, 2020^[3]).

The further developments of the proposed school community engagement model partially depends on having skilled facilitators. This will be useful to identify which actors within the system are best placed to take on this role. The current project suggests using the (regional level) Education Support Centres, Education and Training Boards and/or REALT teams for coordinating and facilitating school community engagements. This option should be further explored in the proposed preparation phase (phase 1). A mapping exercise should be conducted to assess the interest of these organisations and of their staff to develop a master list of facilitators. This could include for example former and current advisors/(facilitators) working with the teacher educational support services. In addition, Ireland could consider looking towards school principals and teachers, or other independent facilitators to supplement and expand this pool of facilitators. The role of young people as peer facilitators could also be explored.

It will also be vital to develop user-friendly facilitation guides and other supporting resources (such as a flyers and posters of the model, self-learning videos to put the Lundy model into practice, etc.). These (digital) tools and resources could provide practical guidance on the roles and responsibilities of facilitators and participants, facilitation methodologies including on the use of the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, exemplars of agendas and guiding prompts for events, and output/feedback reports that consolidate key findings and recommendations for participants and other community members, among others.

Although training of all those participating in consultations may not be feasible, schools may also consider training some teachers in the Participation Framework. Parents, guardians and families could also be supported through the National Parents Council, who already provide resources and webinars for parents, to ensure that their engagement in these engagement processes is meaningful.

Recommendations

- The DE should undertake a mapping of the different actors that could support the facilitation of the school community engagements. It should prioritise the Education Support Centres, including former and current advisors/(facilitators) working with the teacher educational support services, Education and Training Boards and/or REALT teams.
- The DE, in co-ordination with other education bodies and agencies, should ensure that facilitators use the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making.
- User-friendly guidelines and other supporting resources to support the organisation and facilitation of school community engagement events should be developed.
- Consideration could also be paid to building the capacity of students, teachers, school leaders, and parents to meaningfully participate in these stakeholder engagements.

Area for Action 3: Develop and implement a comprehensive communication strategy

A new policy initiative is unlikely to succeed unless those expected to put it in practice understand it, see its value and want to see it happen and, ideally, have ownership of the change. Developing an effective communication strategy is a stepping stone for engaging stakeholders and garnering support for a policy initiative (OECD, 2020^[3]; McKnight and Glennie, 2019^[57]; May, 2015^[58]). Furthermore, pro-actively engaging media organisations can help raise awareness of the model, of its added value and encourage the participation of all. In this regard it is vitally important to promote not just the process, but also the outcomes the model aims to achieve (Council of Europe, 2023^[5]).

Ireland should design and implement a comprehensive communication strategy that explains to all stakeholders – including to children and young people - the overall purpose of engagement, as well as the ways to participate in the model. This can include flyers, posters, and videos. Different communication channels and tools should be considered to make information public, including through a dedicated webpage containing resources for school communities to put the model into practice, as well as newsletters, social media posts, press releases and press conferences (OECD, 2022^[45]). For this, Ireland may look towards the example of France that has dedicated a webpage to its initiative Let's Make School Together. It contains downloadable templates for invitations, posters, PowerPoints, facilitation methodologies and guidelines (see Annex C, Box 5).

The communication strategy should ensure all information is available in Gaeilge (the Irish language) and other languages to ensure the inclusiveness of local school community engagements. While respecting the voluntary nature of the model, the strategy should pay particular attention to those most traditionally unheard in engagement processes (e.g. Traveller and immigrant families) to nudge them toward participating in school community engagements.

In the medium term, the webpage could also collect the outputs and summaries of key findings and recommendations of school community engagements and show how they (potentially) feed into local- and national level policy making and other results achieved. Gathering all up-to-date information and resources in one place and making these available to stakeholders through a trusted source would contribute to building trust and to enhance transparency.

A Citizens' Assembly on Education could also be a way to showcase engagement processes taking place across the country. The outcomes of the engagement events could also contribute to topics of discussion for the Citizens' Assembly thus feeding into wider national strategy.

Recommendations

- The DE should design and implement a comprehensive communication strategy that explains to different stakeholders – including to children and young people – the purpose of engagement, what the model entails, its value added and potential benefits. All information should be available in English, Gaeilge and other languages. The strategy should pay particular attention to those most traditionally removed from engagement processes to nudge them to participate.
- The DE should consider developing an online “hub” for stakeholders to access up-to-date and trusted information on the model, as well as ready-to-use resources (e.g. facilitation guidelines, flyers, posters, invitation templates) and examples of good practices. In the medium term, this webpage could collate the outputs from school community engagements and show how these feed into local- and national level policy making.

Area for Action 4: Ensure adequate resourcing – while being cautious of affordability

The evidence suggests that the successful implementation of stakeholder engagement processes warrants adequate resourcing (OECD, 2021^[59]; OECD, 2020^[2]). The implementation of this roadmap requires investment in the capacity development of sufficient numbers of facilitators and the implementation of a comprehensive communication strategy. Also, organisational costs of events, including venues, catering and transport need to be considered. Experience from this project suggests prioritising the utilisation of school and/or other public facilities such as libraries, local community centres, and public halls.

Another related cost that was beyond the scope of this project but repeatedly raised by several stakeholders, was that of teacher substitution. While acknowledging the ongoing challenges of teacher recruitment and retention, evidence from the project has shown that this is an issue for careful consideration, particularly if the full benefits of the process are to be realised for all involved. In the proposed piloting of the model, emphasis should be placed on mobilising resources already in the system and building on existing measures (such as supply panels at primary, whole-staff and flexible continuous professional development for teachers, release for teachers' participation) for the scale up of the model to be affordable.

Given the resource implications of developing and sustaining school community engagements across the Irish education system, consideration should be given to establishing a secretariat or advisory group to oversee and support the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the model. Ireland should ensure that existing structures at the national- and regional levels are adequately resourced to support school communities in their engagements (see area for action 5).

Recommendations

- Ireland should ensure adequate resourcing to support the development, piloting, monitoring and evaluation of the model, while being cautious of affordability.
- Ireland should carefully consider and monitor the resourcing associated with the various model options, including the costs of face-to-face events such as for venues, transportation, catering, and facilitation. The same applies to the possible provision of substitution.
- Progressive roll out and systematic monitoring should be used to refine the model and ensure its affordability at scale.

Area for Action 5: Embedding the local school community engagement model in the Irish education system

International examples show that many stakeholder engagement processes are one-off initiatives, based on topics or questions decided by public decision makers, and with variable results in terms of influencing the public decision-making process. However, when these processes are embedded in the system through legislative provisions and/or integrating them in existing structures for example, their potential for bringing citizen-informed change and innovation increases (OECD, 2020^[2]; OECD, 2021^[56]; Setälä, 2017^[60]). The envisaged development of an effective and sustainable model across the Irish education system argues for its incorporation into existing decision-making structures and processes.

The existing education policy framework in Ireland will influence the implementation of the model and may require deliberate efforts to work towards policy coherence. A priority that emerged from the project is to rely on existing networks (rather than creating new ones). The Education Support Centres, Education and Training Boards and REALT teams were seen as suitable for i) supporting the co-ordination and facilitation of school community engagements, and ii) aggregating the findings and recommendations and feeding these into regional- and national policy making and planning processes.

In addition, for school communities engaging in the process, emerging findings and recommendations should inform school self-evaluation and improvement planning processes and further nurture home-school connections. This would help ensure that improvement efforts are geared towards the realisation of actions that have been agreed upon by the school community, thereby further strengthening the connections between the school and the local community and enhancing the quality of learning for children and young people.

In order for the engagements to directly feed into national level policy making and planning, Ireland could draw from international examples such as the Ostbelgien model of the German-speaking Community of Belgium (see Annex C, Box 6). It could establish a similar type of national-level panel that formulates, at regular intervals, specific objectives and/or questions for school communities to focus on over a given period. This option may be helpful for school communities that wish to focus their engagements on specific objectives or questions (see Step 1 of the model), in particular if they are provided with resources to support

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and enrich the discussions and reflections. Ireland should further investigate ways to leverage the outcomes from these local discussions to inform national level education policy making.

The Citizens' Assembly in Ireland is a well-established mechanism within the state system. It is lauded internationally for having managed to push several challenging issues forward since 2016 (Walsh and Elkink, 2021^[61]; OECD, 2020^[2]). Several stakeholders therefore suggested that the regular organisation of a Citizens' Assembly on the future of education could help ensure that the findings and recommendations from school community engagements systematically feed into national level policy making.

Recommendations

- The DE could explore the potential and capacity of the Education Support Centres, Education and Training Boards and REALT teams for i) supporting the co-ordination and facilitation of school community engagements, and ii) collecting findings and recommendations to feed into regional- and national policy making and planning processes.
- While respecting the voluntary nature of the model, school communities that organise engagement events could be encouraged to link outcomes to their school self-evaluation and improvement planning; thereby strengthening ties between the school and the local community.
- The DE could consider establishing a national-level panel that formulates, at regular intervals, specific objectives and/or questions for school communities to – voluntarily – draw on for shaping their engagements. This option may be particularly helpful if school communities are provided with resources to support and enrich the discussions and reflections.
- The DE should explore additional measures to ensure that recommendations from local school communities feed back into national level policy making. A Citizens' Assembly on Education could be a vector for this.

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Annex A. Project Working Group

A Project Working Group (PWG) was established at the start of the project and aimed to serve as a consultative platform and provide input on key activities and documents. It was made up of Irish education stakeholders including organisations and entities, as well as student, parent, teacher and school leader representatives (see Table A1). The group met at regular intervals to discuss and provide feedback on milestones (see Table A2) and was essential to ensuring strong stakeholder engagement throughout the implementation of the project.

Table A.1. Organisations and entities that made up the Project Working Group

Members
The Teaching Council
Department of Education
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
Ombudsman for Children’s Office
National Parents Council Primary
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
National Council for Special Education
Education Support Centres Ireland
National Parents Council Post-Primary
Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
Student
Parent
Teacher
Principal
Irish National Teachers’ Organisation
Teachers’ Union of Ireland
Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland
Higher Education Institution
Irish Second-Level Students’ Union
Irish Primary Principals’ Network
National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
Organisations with dynamic membership
Libraries Ireland
Department of Rural and Community Development
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
Participants / observers from other Government departments, institutions or businesses
Department of Rural and Community Development

Table A.2. Project Working Group (PWG) consultations

Consultation number	Date	Topic of discussion
PWG consultation 1	29 June 2021	Project kick-off
PWG consultation 2	15 December 2021	Presenting initial findings
PWG consultation 3	18 May 2022	Defining key elements of a local school community engagement model
PWG consultation 4	30 June 2022	Designing the scope of the pilot exercise
PWG consultation 5	3 October 2022	Defining the model, key variables and questions to pilot
PWG consultation 6	21 March 2022	Providing feedback on the pilot evaluation findings
PWG consultation 7	27 June 2023	Defining key steps of a roadmap to scale up the model

Annex B. Project activities

Learning from existing practices

Building on a desk study of policy documents and reports, the OECD team conducted a series of focus group discussions in November 2021 with different groups of stakeholders, representing the breadth of the education landscape in Ireland (see Table B1). Through semi-structured questions the OECD team examined the existing stakeholder engagement practices, the successes and potential challenges, and options for a local school community engagement model for informing policy making at local, regional, and national levels.

Table B1. Overview of stakeholders included in focus groups

Group	Stakeholders invited to participate
Focus group 1	Teacher Unions
Focus group 2	Department of Education, Ombudsman for Children's Office, National Parents Council Primary, National Parents Council Post-Primary, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, National Council for Special Education
Focus Group 3	Management bodies, Principal bodies
Focus Group 4	Teachers, students, parents, principals
Focus Group 5	Teaching Council, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Department of Rural and Community Development

An online peer learning event was held on 27 April 2022 to present and discuss different models of stakeholder engagement in OECD countries to inform the development of a school community engagement model in Ireland. During the event, participants were invited to provide feedback and actively participate in discussions. The objectives of the event were to i) analyse selected international stakeholder engagement models, ii) discuss specific model features and key contextual factors that determine the success of these models; iii) propose elements or key characteristics that could inform the Irish school community engagement model. Overall, the peer learning event generated much interest, with over 140 participants from Ireland and other OECD countries. An agenda of the event is provided in Table B2.

Table B2. International peer learning event agenda

Time (Ireland)	Activity
16:00-16:15	Signing in to the event
16:15-16:20	Welcome and introduction by Secretary-General, Department of Education Ireland
16:20-16:25	Introduction by European Commission (DG Reform)
16:25-16:30	Introduction by OECD (EDU)
16:30-17:00	Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions, OECD (GOV) Followed by Q&A

Time (Ireland)	Activity
17:00-17:15	Coffee break
17:15-17:45	Case study #1: Finland, the Finnish Education Experimentation Lab, Demos Helsinki Followed by Q&A
17:45-18:15	Case study #2: Ireland, Stakeholder community engagement, Department of Education Case study #3: Ireland, BEACONS process, The Teaching Council Followed by Q&A
18:15-18:20	Wrapping up and next steps

Overview of the pilot exercise

The focus group discussions, the analysis of Irish examples of stakeholder engagement and exploration of relevant international examples supported the identification of the key parameters and variables of a school community engagement model fitting the Irish context. These were examined in a small-scale piloting exercise, consisting of seven school community stakeholder engagement events (organised between November 2022 and February 2023). The co-ordination and facilitation of these events was led by the Burren College of Art, see Table B3. The Centre for Effective Services evaluated the pilot exercise.

Table B3. The seven pilot school community engagement events

Date	Time	Format, Location and venue	Scope of the school community	Focus and topic of discussion	Supporting body
Wednesday 26 October, 2022	10.30 - 14.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In person Kilkenny Hotel 	<p>Cluster of four schools incl. primary and post-primary students, teachers, parents, special needs assistants (SNA) and school leaders.</p> <p>Others: Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), National Council for Special Education (NCSE), local education support centre</p> <p>(50 participants)</p>	Arts Education in the Primary School Curriculum	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
Tuesday 15 November, 2022	10.00 - 14.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In person Athlone, Westmeath Hotel 	<p>Cluster of four schools incl. primary and post-primary students, parents, teachers, SNA, and school leaders.</p> <p>Others: NCCA, NCSE, Teaching Council, local education support centre</p> <p>(60 participants)</p>	STEM Education and the Primary School Curriculum	NCCA

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Date	Time	Format, Location and venue	Scope of the school community	Focus and topic of discussion	Supporting body
Wednesday 30 November, 2022	14.00 - 17.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In person Laois Education Support Centre 	<p>Cluster of six schools incl. primary and post-primary students, parents, teachers, and school leaders.</p> <p>Others: Department of Education, local education centre</p> <p>(30 participants)</p>	Led by participants (topics included diversity and inclusion, well-being, approaches to learning)	Laois Education Support Centre
Wednesday 18 January, 2023	14.00 - 16.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online (with a school group participating in-person) Via Zoom 	<p>Cluster of three schools, incl. post-primary students, teachers, SNAs, parents, and school leaders.</p> <p>Others: Kerry Education and Training Board (ETB)</p>	Led by participants (topics included diversity and inclusion, well-being, time, senior cycle reform, student support services)	Kerry ETB
Tuesday 7 February, 2023	9.30 - 14.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In person Connemara University centre 	<p>Cluster of six schools, incl. primary and post-primary students, parents, teachers, SNA, and school leaders.</p> <p>Others: Department of Education, local organisations and associations, PDST, the Teaching Council</p> <p>(80 participants)</p>	Sustainability of small schools	Department of Education
Thursday 9 February, 2023	16.30 - 18.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online Via Zoom 	<p>Teachers; school leaders and representatives from Education and Support Centres Ireland (ESCI), ETB, the Teaching Council</p> <p>(80 participants)</p>	Follow up on findings from previous Kerry and Laois events "What matters to local school communities?"	The Teaching Council
Tues 28 February, 2023	9.30 - 14.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In person Youghal, Cork Community Centre 	<p>Cluster of three schools, incl. students, parents, teachers, SNA, school leaders.</p> <p>Others: Department of Education, Teaching Council, NCSE, TESS (Education Welfare), REALT coordinator, ETB</p> <p>(40 participants)</p>	Inclusion of Ukrainian refugees within the local school community'	Department of Education

Source: Adapted from (unpublished^[49]), Assessment of the Local School Community Engagement Pilot, April 2023

Annex C. Creating spaces for conversations at the school community level: the BEACONS model in Ireland

Box 2. A 2019 BEACONS event in Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow, Ireland

In 2019 the Irish Teaching Council developed the BEACONS “Bringing Education Alive for our Communities On a National Scale” initiative to bring together diverse stakeholders locally to promote and facilitate more and better conversations between teachers, parents and students, and to create a supportive education ecosystem for both teaching and learning. After a first pilot in Ennistymon, Co Clare, a second BEACONS event took place in Baltinglass, a town in south-west County Wicklow in November 2019.

The participating school community was made up of five local primary and post-primary schools (*Scoil Chonglais, Scoil Noamh Iosaf, Bigstone National School, Stratford Lodge National School, Stratford-on-Slaney National School*), as well as several education organisations (*Lalor Centre, Adult Basic Education Service West Wicklow, Baltinglass Outdoor Education Centre*). Partners included the Teaching Council and the Burren College of Art. The event convened a total of 56 attendees including principals, teachers, students and parents. It was held at a local restaurant and took place over the course of a 1½ day, organised into three sessions:

- **Day 1 (evening): Listening to each other:** Participants, including principals, teachers, parents and students, were invited to get to know each other and share their perspective and experience of the education system.
- **Day 2 (morning): Sharing good stories:** Participants were prompted to share stories of education at its best, identifying common qualities in the stories, and the potential for such stories to happen more often. Small groups were constituted with a number of interactive activities that gave participants the opportunity to talk about issues that were important to them. For example, topics of discussions that emerged were: stress, developing creativity, outdoor education, student health and well-being, fostering links between schools, reducing plastic, the use of phones and social media, etc.
- **Day 2 (afternoon): Discussing priorities:** Participants were encouraged to reflect on previous sessions and determine next steps.

Throughout the sessions, groups were broken up in various ways. In some instances, participants were invited to gather into their “constituencies”, i.e. teachers, principals, parents, students, and others, to reflect on their group’s experiences of education. In other instances, school-based groupings allowed to reflect on learnings and next steps; randomised groups of new people and pairs for deeper reflection. Plenary discussions were also used to collect the information generated in the smaller discussions and draw attention to common themes and differences between the groups.

This event formed part of a trial that was evaluated by the Centre for Effective Services (2019^[26]). Overall, participants reported a high level of satisfaction regarding the BEACONS event, in that they were able to speak of issues of importance to them, and praised the opportunity for open conversations between principals, teachers, parents and students at the local level.

Source: Centre for Effective Services (2019^[26]) *Evaluation of the first series of BEACONS events*, <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/about-us/1/beacons/reports-resources/beacons-ces-report-evaluation-of-the-first-series-of-beacons-events.pdf> (accessed 13 January 2023) Teaching Council (not published^[62]) *OECD-Ireland Implementation Support: Country Background Questionnaire*.

Annex D. International examples of stakeholder engagement

A locally defined purpose for school communities: Community Schools in Japan

Box 3. Community Schools in Japan

Revitalising local communities around schools

In Japan, the term “Community Schools” refers to public schools that involve communities in school management to reflect specific needs unique to each community. The Community School model was established to help transform conventional schools into community-based schools that can be managed by teachers, local residents, parents, and other relevant parties working together. This model is expected to enable schools to reflect local residents’ views and opinions in school management, thereby developing schools with distinctive features that reflect the creativity of local communities (OECD, 2018^[63]).

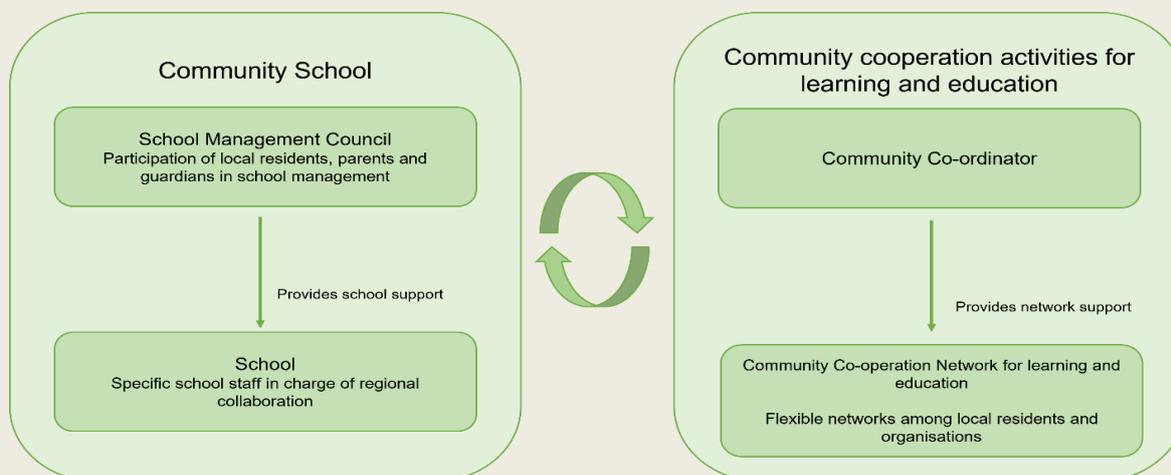
The concept(/model) of a “Community School” was first proposed in 2000 by the National Commission on Educational Reform, an advisory body to the Prime Minister. It was adopted in 2004, enabling the participation of non-education professionals in school management, through the establishment of a school management council, composed of parents, guardians and local residents. The school management council were given the following three functions:

- To approve basic policies on school management compiled by the principal: The school management council is involved in formulating policy to improve the school with the principal and teachers and other personnel.
- To express opinions to municipal boards of education or schools on matters concerning school management: The school management council is established as a consultative body in school management, and its members are therefore entitled to state their opinions on school management issues in general, not only on the school’s basic policies on education.
- To express opinions to prefectural boards of education concerning the appointment of teachers and other personnel: The school management council is composed to be able to state its opinions directly to the prefectural boards of education, which recruit teachers and other personnel, on personnel matters concerning teachers and other personnel.

The school management council system represents one of the two pillars of the broader Community School model that aims to promote effective collaboration and co-operation between schools and communities. The second pillar consists of the activities for learning and co-operation provided by the community (see Figure 10). Such activities include for instance after-school classes for children, support for education at home, community building through learning, or community activities by regional societies. These two pillars are promoted as an integrated process and are expected to strengthen each other to help schools realise an educational curriculum open to society, involve local residents in school activities, and revitalise regional communities using schools as a hub.

Since the Community School programme began in 2004, the number of Community Schools has been increasing steadily from 17 in 2005, to 2 806 in 2016. This process sped up after a law proposed by the Central Council for Education was implemented in 2017, stating that every school should aim to become a community school. A recent survey from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) highlighted that the three reasons invoked the most for transforming a school into a Community School were that local boards of education considered that it would be effective for building a community centred on schools (75%), that it would be effective for

improving the school (68%), and that it is mandatory under the Local Education Act (58%). As of May 2021, 11 856 public schools were operating as Community Schools. This represents 33% of public schools, with great variation across regions.



To encourage and support schools and communities to embark on this reform journey, MEXT has set clear policy directions to establish and enhance the Community School Framework. First, MEXT highlights the importance for the transition to be voluntary. Initiated by local stakeholders, change is more likely to be sustained. Rather than imposing a top-down approach, MEXT therefore recommends the municipal boards of education to review the landscape of Community Schools, and actively promote them to build on public support where it is needed. At the regional level, Prefectural Boards of Education (regional education administration) are expected to clarify their vision and the purpose of the Community School programme. They need to develop their collaboration with the Governor’s bureau (the regional administration) to build a prefectural-wide promotion system, in capacity of enhancing teachers’ training opportunities and training contents and promoting the establishment of Community Schools.

Second, MEXT recognises that the development and the sustainability of the Community Schools relies on financial support and quality improvement. MEXT plans to provide financial aid to support Community School development in prefectures and municipalities, and clarify the role and qualities required for co-ordinators to ensure the quality of community activities. In addition, MEXT advocates for the participation of a variety of members in school management councils, to represent the diversity of communities and enrich partnerships. This inclusive membership should be combined with specific resources (such as training) dedicated to improving the competence and building the capacity of the school management council members.

Finally, MEXT advises to keep refining the roles and responsibilities of different actors. This includes broadening the mandate of the school management councils to include “providing support for schools”, securing that the council’s opinions are taken into account in school management decisions, and valuing school leadership by ensuring that the principal’s opinions are taken into account when appointing members for the school management council. Furthermore, it is also possible for a single council to manage several schools, which would facilitate the smooth integration of education between unified primary and secondary schools. This will promote not only school to community collaboration, but also school-to-school collaboration, progressively transitioning from individual, isolated partnerships to integrated, networking among schools and communities.

Source: OECD (2018_[63]), Education Policy in Japan: Building Bridges towards 2030, OECD Publishing, Paris.

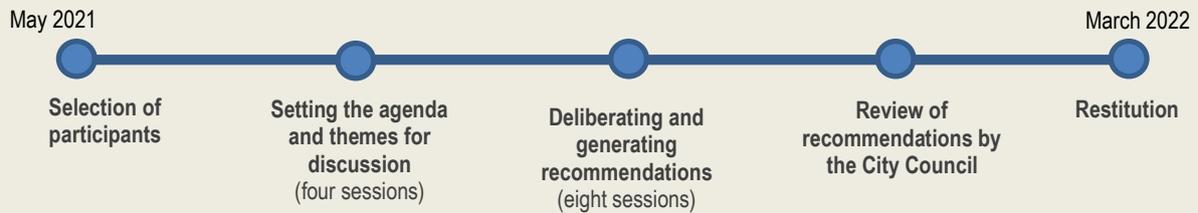
Formulating questions or focus areas to frame discussions: The Barcelona Youth Forum

Box 4. The Barcelona Youth Forum

Formulating questions of focus areas to frame discussions

Organised by the Barcelona City Council and through the online platform Decidim, the Barcelona Youth Forum was implemented in 2021-2022. It brought together 99 randomly selected (stratified according to demographic and socioeconomic criteria) people aged 16-29 living in Barcelona, to deliberate, through five phases, on the following question: “As a young person living in Barcelona, what would you need to carry out your life project?”. A first step of the deliberation process was to choose the main themes for the process to follow. These came out to be mental health, emancipation, and education.

The five phases of the Barcelona Youth Forum



The question for debate in education was: “How can the City Council offer a service for employment, emotional, academic and values orientation in the educational stage and beyond?”. It had the following sub-question: “What tools can the City Council offer and help to disseminate the services it offers to the different age groups?”. Through deliberation, several concrete recommendations were made, such as to:

- Train teachers on gender/racism/LGBTIQ+ issues so that they could be discussed throughout the curriculum;
- Improve mentoring and education on labour and entrepreneurship topics;
- Develop adapted and tailored communication methods on the resources available to young people;
- Create an expert committee to support teachers in responding to complex student situations (difficult family situation, bullying, etc.)

At the end of deliberation, the Barcelona City Council reviewed and provided feedback on the citizen recommendations. Out of the five recommendations on education, two were accepted with major edits, two with minor edits, and one without any edits. Four of these recommendations were allocated further support.

Source: Decidim (2022^[64]), *Foro Joven BCN*, <https://www.decidim.barcelona/processes/forumjoveBCN?locale=es> (accessed on 20 April 2022).

Effective communication for information sharing and joint “learning”: School community consultations in France

Box 5. Let’s Make School Together in France

In September 2022, the French Government launched a national campaign to engage its citizens in policy making and decision-making. For education, the programme has been given shape through the five-year programme (2022-2027) *Notre École, Faisons-la Ensemble* [Let’s Make School Together]. The objective of the programme is to encourage school communities to come together to elaborate innovative and local initiatives that could support the well-being and learning of students and contribute to reduce inequalities in their context.

The programme consists of three phases, with no obligation to progress to the next:

- The first phase consists of an initial consultation with the school community, including school leaders, teachers, staff, students, parents, the regional education authorities and any other stakeholder the school community wishes to involve (e.g., local business for Vocational Education and Training (VET) schools, arts and sports clubs). Typically, this phase is facilitated by the school leader, a teacher or an external facilitator. The objective is to draw up the school profile and characteristics and define its principles, values and challenges.
- In the second phase, which can follow up from the consultation in phase 1, stakeholders define an innovative project based on three pillars: excellence and learning for all students, fight against inequality, and well-being.
- In the third phase, schools that wish to implement their project can apply for funding. These are available on a rolling basis and are allocated by a project committee at the regional level. Funds can be allocated to staffing and material resources to implement the project. These projects benefit from implementation support, as well as monitoring and evaluation support by the regional level education authority.

The French Ministry of Education (MENJ) allocated 500 million Euros to support the implementation of the programme over five years (2022-27) which innovative projects can tap into for support. Between October 2022 and June 2023 over 2 700 projects were submitted and almost 480 had received dedicated support.

The programme has a dedicated webpage on the MENJ website. In addition to communicating on the purpose and process of the programme, the webpage includes a suite of tools and guiding materials for school communities to use. These include customisable invitations, posters and information letters, power point presentation templates and output documents, as well as facilitation guidelines. Reports of consultation outcomes are also regularly uploaded on the MENJ website.

Source: Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse (2023^[65]), *Notre École, Faisons-la Ensemble*, <http://eduscol.education.fr/3595/notre-ecole-faisons-la-ensemble> (accessed on 20 June 2023).

Equal learning partners and developing capacity for participation: The Finnish Education Experimentation Lab

Box 6. The Finnish Education Experimentation Lab

How Finnish schools and policymakers explore complexity together

Despite being among the best performing education systems internationally for many years (OECD, 2020^[66]), the Finnish education system has set out on a path of innovation. In particular, a curriculum reform initiated in 2016 aimed at designing teaching and learning from the perspective of the learner, leveraging the potential of the digital age, and ensuring equity in education. However, Finnish schools and municipalities have found it difficult to put into practice the learner centred vision and the skills-based orientation of the new national curriculum. In addition, the support offered by the Innovation Centre at the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) has sometimes been deemed insufficient to help teachers put the desired innovations in teaching and learning into practice (OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2018^[67]).

Recognising that schools need additional support to bring the new curriculum to life, EDUFI launched in 2018 the first iteration of its “Experimentation Lab”, which is a year-long facilitated process to support teachers, school leaders and local education administrators as they engage and work with one another in new ways, experiment and co-create local solutions to educational challenges. The Lab’s creation responded to a need to address “wicked problems” i.e. challenges that are so complicated and intertwined that usual management approaches are unable to solve them. It also offered an opportunity to develop a more open, dynamic governance system between national level steering and local level implementation. Such a governance system is expected to be more agile, and help Finnish schools thrive in a rapidly and ever-changing environment.

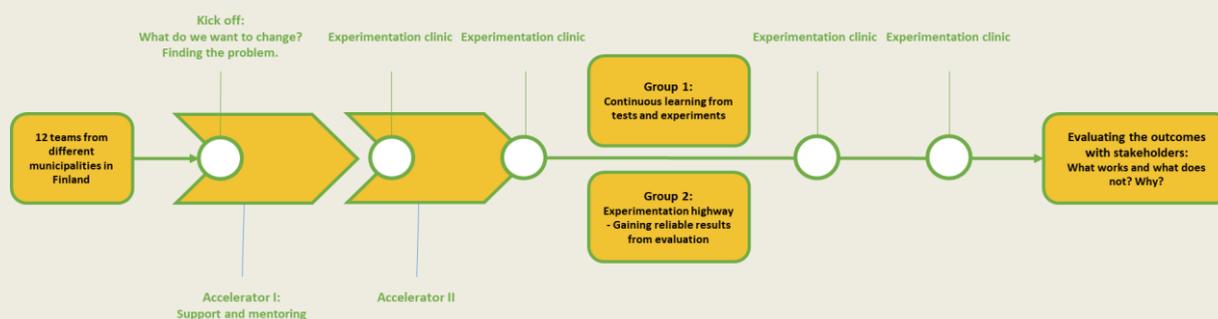
The Lab posits there is no “silver bullet” for complex problems and considers that resilience relies on the system’s capacity and stakeholders’ agency for improving and innovating teaching and learning. Accordingly, the Lab promoted systematic capacity development and empowerment of educators as change agents and supported learning across the whole education system. This approach redefines the role of national governments that are no longer perceived as (merely) central planners seeking to scale up nationally agreed policies. Instead, national agencies act as learning partners to local systems, creating a conducive environment for local actors to find their own answers to complex problems.

However, collective learning DEs not happen by accident. The Lab uses experimentation as a vehicle for improving interaction and feedback loops between key stakeholders. Importantly, “testing” and “experimenting” do not refer here to creating controlled settings to benchmark a type of intervention against another, but rather to exploration and relationship building. The ultimate goal being to enable and promote local learning, and to build a bridge between strategy and implementation.

In its first iteration, the Lab invited participants to form 12 teams to work on a wide range of local challenges, from developing approaches to foster students’ well-being or social-emotional skills, to teaching digital capabilities through playful adventures, to leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI) to increase students’ physical activity. As mentioned above, the Lab pursued two main objectives:

- Developing capacity (knowledge, skills, and mindsets) among teachers and school leaders to develop teaching and learning through experimenting, piloting and co-creating solutions at the local level.
- Exploring, testing and developing new approaches to enhance interaction, dialogue, and shared understanding between national level steering and local level implementation to better respond to the complexity of challenges in education.

The process started with an “accelerator phase”, where the teams learnt to develop, experiment and prototype solutions. They deepened their understanding of the problems they were working on, learnt human-centred design approaches and gained courage and skills to test their ideas in practice. Throughout the programme, “clinic” days were organised at regular intervals. The clinics were a chance to share learnings with others, get expert advice, and engage in dialogue around important themes that affect all teams. Between the clinics the teams ran, evaluated, and collected evidence from experiments independently.



An evaluation of the Lab, conducted by the Centre for Public Impact, highlighted how the 12-month process built trust among stakeholders, including parents who were not necessarily heard before. It required adjustment to the role of central actors, shifting from “experts” with an authoritative position, to equal partners in a co-construction process. Values such as empathy and listening became key skills for public officials to cultivate, which supported the development of a culture of positive error, where stakeholders dare to experiment in a safe environment.

In addition, the Lab’s learning process has built-in scaffolds along the way, to help teams not only create better solutions to local challenges, but also serve as a powerful way to build the participants’ innovation capacities. The Lab contributed to creating a strengthened term “community of practice” equipped to develop practical solutions. Overall, the initiative has shown a way government can facilitate new forms of interaction and engagement among stakeholders and leverage bottom-up approaches to support innovations in teaching and student learning. The Lab also created new ways for knowledge and information to circulate within the Finnish education system and to shape practices to drive system change.

Source: OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (2020), The Experimentation Lab – Finnish schools and education government exploring complexity together, <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/experimentation-lab/> (accessed on 24 July 2023)

Recognising the model in legislation to ensure public accountability and commitment to action: the Ostbelgien model

Box 7. The Ostbelgien model

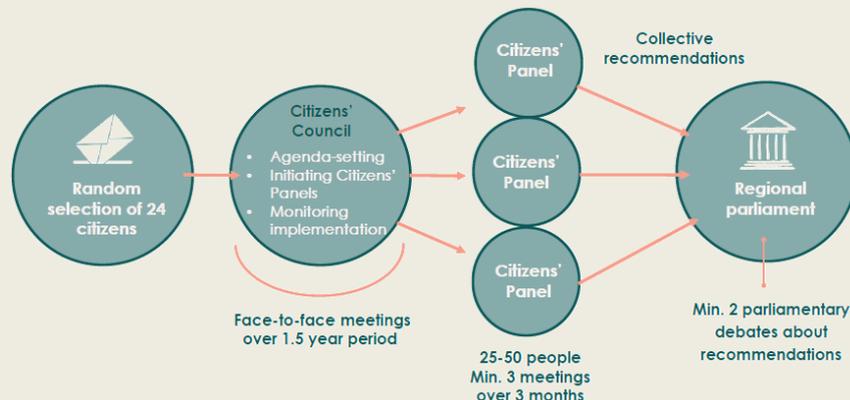
Recognising the model in legislation to ensure public accountability and commitment to action

Since 2019, in the German-speaking Community of Belgium (Ostbelgien), three new democratic institutions were established to complement the regional parliament.

First, a permanent Citizens' Council, comprised of 24 randomly selected citizens, has a two-fold mandate: 1) setting the agenda by initiating up to three ad hoc Citizens' Panels during its term and deciding the issues the Panels should address; 2) the Council monitors that the recommendations from the Panels are presented and debated in the parliament and receive a response from the relevant parliamentary committee and minister.

Second, the Citizens' Panels, comprised of 25 to 50 randomly selected citizens meet for a minimum of three times over three months to analyse selected issues and prepare recommendations. In addition, proposals that have the support of at least 100 citizens, and proposals of parliamentary groups or the government, can also be submitted for the consideration by the Citizens' Council.

Third, a Secretariat of full-time officials carries out the regular random selection of citizens for the Council.



Source: OECD (2020^[2]), Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en> (accessed on 1 June 2022)

A changing purpose: the Madrid City Observatory

Box 8. Madrid City Observatory

The City Observatory is a model of a permanent deliberative stakeholder body that has been developed and implemented by Madrid City Council in Spain. It was established through a regulation passed on 29 January 2019 that transformed the existing City Observatory into a deliberative body comprised of randomly selected citizens with new competencies. The initial Observatory was limited to a regular meeting between governing politicians and civil servants to analyse data about citizens' opinions (collected through traditional means like opinion polls, focus groups, etc.). Until this regulatory change, the City Observatory had not held any meetings for several years.

In the first week of February 2019, the Council sent out 30 000 letters to households inviting them to be selected for the Observatory. On 12 March 2019, the 49 inaugural members were randomly selected among the 1 135 people who put themselves forward. The group of 49 was chosen stratifying for gender, age, and geographical location (which is strongly correlated to income distribution) to ensure representativeness. Mandated to address and propose solutions to key issues for the well-being of citizens in Madrid, the design of the City Observatory was for members to meet and deliberate over citizen proposals a minimum of eight times per year.

The agenda of the meetings was informed by the proposals submitted to the “decide.madrid” online platform. At each meeting (at least), the most popular proposal on the platform was discussed. Observatory members analysed the proposals and could suggest improvements if the author of the proposal agreed. They were also free to define their own agenda and focus on any issues within the municipality's competencies. The members then had the power to send the citizen proposals, as well as their own proposals, to a local referendum, in this way opening up meaningful opportunities for participation in both setting the agenda and having a say in decision-making.

The Madrid City Observatory is an example of digital, deliberative, and direct democracy. However, after a change in government in May 2019, the future of the City Observatory was brought into question. After a period of many months that involved announcements to abolish the City Observatory and a public consultation on the matter, in February 2020, the composition and function of the Observatory reverted back to a body comprised of governing politicians and civil servants.

Source: OECD (2020^[2]), Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>

Implementing Education Policies: Supporting Effective Change in Education



This document was prepared by the OECD Implementing Education Policies team.

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The project "Support to improve local community engagement in Ireland's education policy development" was funded by the European Commission via the mission of the Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support DG REFORM (REFORM/IM2021/030). This publication was produced with the financial assistance of the DG REFORM. The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union.

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