

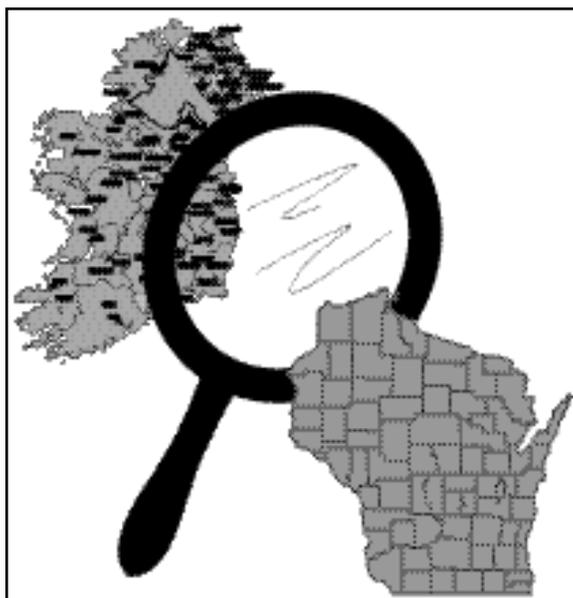
AN IRISH EDUCATION LESSON FOR WISCONSIN

SAMMIS B. WHITE

A number of persons concerned with education reform in Wisconsin journeyed to Ireland in April of this year to learn more about the Irish educational system. Traveling to Ireland for such a study may seem unlikely, given the history of low educational achievement in that country (still the second-lowest literacy rate in all of Europe) and its tradition of very high unemployment rates

(20% as recently as 1990). But the Irish economy has turned around. Since the mid-1990s, the GDP has grown at least 8% annually. Ireland is now importing workers rather than exporting them. The unemployment rate is below 5%. Incomes are rising (over 8% per year for the last three years), and Dublin alone added over 100,000 new cars to its streets in the first four months of 2000. Surprising as it may sound, education has been a key ingredient.

We wanted to learn more about the country, its schools, and their role in the country's economic turnaround. How could their economy become transformed so quickly? It changed so fast that it caught the Irish economists completely off guard — they looked internally, ignoring larger international forces,



and predicted continued high rates of unemployment for the 1990s. What appears to have happened, however, is that the schools had produced a literate population of English speakers who appealed to the growing, high-technology sector. A number of U.S. computer and software companies established their European headquarters in Ireland. Their decisions were made

on the basis of available, educated workers, wage rates, communication skills, and the Irish entry into the European Union. Also contributing was the re-creation and expansion of twelve post-secondary Institutes of Technology.

The result is a rapidly growing economy with an ever-greater technology presence. The need for and interest in education has expanded. And for the first time in years, more money has been flowing into the school system. Ironically, the great drop in unemployment came about after years of modest funding for the schools. It appears that the schools of Ireland have been staffed by a very capable,

Sammis B. White is Professor, Department of Urban Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

dedicated group of individuals who have helped students from all income levels succeed. Similar success is desired for all of the students of Wisconsin. We hoped to learn what Ireland has been doing that might be transferable to Wisconsin and especially to Milwaukee.

Lessons Learned

It is clear that Ireland is not at all like Milwaukee, but it has some similarities with the rest of Wisconsin. The country has a population of approximately 3 million persons compared with Wisconsin's 5 million. Ireland's population is almost exclusively Irish. It is just beginning to have immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe. Ireland's main export has been its youth. But this may be changing, as it now has attractive jobs and is actively recruiting its expatriates from settings around the globe. They are being begged to come home. That suggests the expatriates have some skills the mother country thinks will help it develop further.

From our observations, that should be the case. The structure and execution of education appears to be strong, although still struggling to succeed with students from disadvantaged families. Unlike the U.S., the education system is centrally controlled. Yes, each community has its schools. But they are subject to regulation by a central body. Representatives of that central body even visit individual classrooms and, on occasion, actually take over classes for short periods of time. There is a standard, national curriculum. There are standard, national exams given at specific intervals. But the day-to-day teaching is not standardized. A variety of books and materials are used for the same subjects across school districts. Different material is taught on the same day. But all teachers and schools are responsible for preparing their students for the national exams.

Irish schools are organized quite similarly to ours. Schools are organized into three levels: Primary (K-4 to 6th grade) = first level; Post-primary, equivalent to our middle and high schools = second level; and post-secondary = third level. The major difference is the combi-

nation of middle and high schools. Milwaukee, by contrast, is moving to increase the number of elementary schools that include Kindergarten to eighth grade, thinking that the nurturing environment is greater in the smaller schools.

Six years is the compulsory school age for children. But the Irish have a commitment to pre-school. Some 65% of its four-year olds and almost all of its five-year olds are enrolled in pre-primary school. The pre-primary is incorporated into the primary-school system.

National exams are given at three points in the Irish system. In U.S. terms, the national exams are a "high stakes" enterprise. Students must pass each to move on to the next level of schooling. The three are: the Primary exam to earn the Primary Certificate, given at the end of sixth grade (age 12); the Junior Certificate exam, given at age 15 or the end of ninth grade; and the "Leaving Certificate exam," given at either age 17 or 18. The Leaving Certificate exam has recently been expanded to include not only the traditional academic option exam but also two additional options, a Leaving Certificate Applied and a Leaving Certificate Vocational.

The Leaving Certificate Vocational is the normal Leaving Certificate but with a concentration of technical subjects and some additions. It ties into a European Union emphasis on vocational preparation. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a less demanding approach that attempts to keep students in school until at least 17 and better prepare them for adulthood and work. It does not prepare them for third-level course work.

The traditional, academic Leaving Certificate exam, taken after either five or six years of second-level education, determines not only where one can go to college but also what one can study in college. Those who score at the top can go to places like Oxford and Cambridge and study law and medicine. Those who score in the top 20% can study education. Students have several university choices across the British Isles, and, interestingly, those who score higher and are interested in

education tend to choose elementary education. The key point here is to realize that the teachers in the Irish system have come from the top 20% of all students. This is a far cry from America where more recent teachers tend to have the lowest scores of any college major.

The national exam given at 6th grade must be passed to proceed to the second level. It and the Junior Certificate exam consist of nine exams on ten or eleven subjects. The exams are comprehensive and take some effort to pass. In fact, some 900 to 1000 students per year do not pass the Primary Certificate exam, and some 3000 students per year do not progress past the Junior Certificate.

With a history of commitment to a "high stakes" exam system, there is little debate of its merits. It seems to focus education, but yet give schools and teachers flexibility in how they prepare students. Yes, Ireland still has a dropout problem, but it is not close to the scale of one found in Milwaukee. Approximately 82% of each age-cohort of students pass the Leaving exam. The exam system appears to focus attention but not cause the problems critics here charge. Nevertheless, there is a new effort to raise that completion rate even higher.

Another element of Irish education that was of note is the fact that teachers are well respected. Teachers have status. This is not just reflected in their higher national test scores. It is reflected in salaries that indicate that teaching is a desirable occupation. And it is reflected in society, where teachers are regarded with honor and admiration. It would be fortunate if the same could be said in all of Wisconsin.

Education itself is almost universally thought to be important. It has been a ticket

out of Ireland, and now it appears to be seen as a ticket within Ireland. Even in households where the parents did not get past sixth grade, education is often being stressed. In fact, the national Constitution states that parents are primarily responsible for their child's education. Some parents are taking that responsibility even further; several of those who passed only the Primary Certificate have gone back to school with their children and taken Junior Certificate courses and exams.

Teacher salaries have been very competitive up to this point in Ireland. Whether they will remain so in the "new economy" is yet to be seen. But to date, the field has been very attractive. Only the better teachers seem to make it to tenure in the classroom. Not only must one score well on college entrance exams, teachers must do well on teaching practicums starting with their first year of college. Unlike the U.S. where teacher education is all in the college classroom until the last year, Irish education students must start teaching in the K-12 classroom in their first year. If they are in elementary education, they

have experience over four years. If they are entering high school teaching, they have teaching experience over the five years before they graduate. Such experience makes them better able to handle the classroom. But it also weeds out those who do not like what they are doing or who are not doing it well. Such additional experience seems to be a wise element to include in teacher preparation here.

Teachers, however, are not very complimentary of the college portion of their teacher-education programs. Irish teachers, like their Wisconsin counterparts, think that they have learned much more on the job than in the college classrooms. The teachers are succeeding,

The key point here is to realize that the teachers in the Irish system have come from the top 20% of all students.

but with nominal thanks to their teacher-education programs. It sounds like we have less to learn here, except for the important lesson of additional years of classroom experience.

Just as in Wisconsin, the teachers in Ireland are organized into a strong union. That union, however, has been a bit more flexible in its dealings. Principals do have control over who teaches in their buildings; otherwise, conditions sound quite similar. The union is now cooperating on several initiatives that involve partnerships of teachers and parents and teachers and businesses. Change is not immediate, but the union is slowly negotiating new ways to operate.

Because of a weak economy until the mid-1990s, Ireland did not have many initiatives in its education system. But since 1995, additional funds have been spent on special programs for the disadvantaged. Included in these has been an effort to reduce class size from a standard of 34 to a standard of 29. The teachers have been most appreciative of the reduction and would love to see more. The success the system has had to date with the larger class sizes is testimony to the strength of the teachers and the emphasis on education. Results may well improve more with the new initiatives. But their success to date suggests that class size is not a central element for student achievement.

A striking difference from some of the U.S. experience is that we found dedicated, skilled, experienced teachers in the most challenged schools. The experienced teachers have not opted for the suburban or middle-class schools. They have taken on the challenges of educating children raised in the projects.

One level-two school we visited was an example of a project school. The area it serves is home to over 1600 low-income families. Some 45% of the adults have only primary education. In 72% of the households the principal earner is unemployed. Some 82% of the families are on social welfare. And 42% receive "lone" parent support. It sounds a lot like the population Milwaukee schools serve, only the Irish school is all white.

The population in the school comes in with some deficits. All have passed the primary certificate, but 53% come in with a reading deficit. Others are not excited about continuing in school. But the teaching and support staffs work with them all to get 95% through the Junior Certificate and a smaller but still sizable percentage through the Leaving Certificates. These schools do not yet have all of the answers, but they have several instructive initiatives.

Among the initiatives is a home-school coordinator. The coordinator makes a point of looking after parents of problem children, although she makes contact with all parents. The program countrywide aims to have one coordinator for each 200 families. The initial impression is that this contact is a vital one that keeps kids in school and keeps the parent supportive of education. One part of the job involves attempting to get the parent(s) into the school for additional education themselves. That seems to be bearing some fruit.

Another initiative that may be more active than ours is the follow-up on absenteeism. One of the few facts we know in education is that students who attend more days of school do better. The schools there seem to monitor and call parents more commonly, insuring a higher attendance rate.

The level-two school also offered parent classes on a regular basis. Seven different courses are offered. Some, such as pottery and cookery, are to help get parents in the door. Others such as spelling/English, computers, and creative writing aim at giving parents skills that might be used in the labor market. Still others, such as parenting skills and personal development, are aimed at strengthening the family and making a stronger case for the support of their children's and their own education. Parents additionally are encouraged to take classes with their children, if they also have yet to pass the Junior Certificate or the Leaving exam. These are forms of true parent involvement.

Another initiative that might be explored here is what the Irish call a "transitional" year.

If students pass their intermediate certificate at age 15, they can continue on in their academic pursuit or they can take a year of classes that is not on the same path. Thus, students who have a very hard academic schedule might take a year of classes that contain many art or industrial art courses, for example, or if they specialize in science, they might take more courses in the humanities. The idea is to broaden their horizons and relieve some pressure before they have to prepare for the Leaving exam. Not all students take advantage of the year, but those that did spoke positively of the experience.

One condition that is similar to Wisconsin is the amount of time spent in school annually. The Irish school year is 185 days long, and a school day is five hours and 40 minutes. That is very close to what we currently have in Wisconsin.

Partnerships are a growing part of the Irish education, one that might be emulated here. Not only are the national and local education authorities working more closely together (education costs are basically paid for by the national government and supplemented local-

ly), local districts are attempting to establish partnerships between parents and teachers, between schools and unions, and between schools and other community actors. Education is seen as an activity that should not be isolated and expected to occur only within the confines of a building.

Our Conclusions

As we reflected on the Irish education system, we were impressed by: the skill and commitment of the teachers and administrators, the efforts made to involve parents in education, the focus the national exams give to the education enterprise, the high regard with which teachers are held, the additional hands-on training teacher-education students receive, the higher level of school discipline, the pronounced commitment to pre-school education, and the general support for the importance of education. Not all of that can be easily transferred to Wisconsin, but several elements do seem important to raising levels of student achievement and should be explored, if not pursued, here in Wisconsin.