

## IDEA Formal Education Working Group Written Submission to the National Conversation on Education - February 2026

*What would it take for the Irish education system to provide a positive learning experience that enables all children and young people to succeed in a rapidly changing world? Focus on the areas that matter most to you. (1000 words max.)*

It would take a few strategic and radical changes for the Irish education system to provide a positive learning experience that enables all children and young people to succeed in a rapidly changing world. We believe this requires a **paradigm shift** among policymakers, school and youth work planners, school and youth work leaders, and teachers and educators. Parents/guardians, learners and the rest of the school and learning community would follow suit.

The paradigm shift required relates to a shift in **education's purpose**. As mentioned in our vision for the Irish education system by 2040, schools will need to move beyond a narrow focus on exams, careers and profit, and place a far greater emphasis on nurturing the relationship among humans and between humanity and the natural world.

Part of this paradigm shift is also a true socio-political reckoning with the reality of today's rapidly changing world, which is globalised and interdependent amid unprecedented challenges that threaten the fabric of human existence. This reality requires all stakeholders to shape the education system in a way that urgently equips all learners from the earliest years to adulthood to grapple with these challenges and to respond collectively in a way that ensures a safer, fairer and more sustainable future for everyone. In other words, education should aim to create a **society of active global citizens**.

Fortunately, there is a well-established and effective pedagogy for achieving this. It is called **Global Citizenship Education (GCE)** and it needs to be **embedded much more** into the Irish education system, alongside a wellbeing and regenerative approach.

Global Citizenship Education enables children and young people to reflect critically on the world they live in and their place in it. It equips people of all ages with the knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence needed to navigate today's complex world. Irish Aid describes GCE as "a lifelong educational process, which aims to increase public awareness and understanding of the **rapidly changing**, inter-dependent and unequal world in which we live. By challenging stereotypes and encouraging independent thinking, GCE helps people to critically explore how global justice issues interlink with their everyday lives and how they can act to build a better world."

It would take significant investment by the Department of Education and Youth in GCE, and close coordination with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade who have been leading Ireland's policy and investment commitment to GCE for decades and have acquired invaluable experience that the Department of Education and Youth could benefit and learn from. It would require a whole-of-government approach with a supportive and coherent policy context. Other enabling factors and conditions needed are long-term commitment and continued, strategic, coordinated efforts among all stakeholders.

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Increased investment in Global Citizenship Education from state champions such as Irish Aid should meet the internationally recognised target of at least 3% of Official Development Assistance. Other relevant funds from, for example, the community development and environment budgets are also required.

The increased investment could finance the achievement of the priorities outlined in our vision for the Irish education system by 2040 (see answer to survey question on our hopes for the future). Increased investment would go hand in hand with the following policy priorities:

- Stronger alignment and coordination between Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship Education (GCE). In practical terms, this could be achieved via funding a staff member in every school who has a non-teaching role for at least 2 days per week to focus on whole-school sustainability. This would include leading school development in all areas of ESD & GCE, in the context of Curriculum, Campus and Community. Smaller schools could share a sustainability coordinator. All school leaders should receive training on the role of education and schools in the polycrises of climate change, inequality, food security, biodiversity loss and conflict.
- Prioritisation of the wellbeing of learners.
- Prioritisation of teacher/educator wellbeing and professional support: Protect teachers' mental health, provide sustained values-based training, strengthen teacher agency, and create space for creativity and innovation in classrooms.
- Global Citizenship Education (GCE) embedded across the curriculum: GCE - encompassing knowledge, values and meaningful action, is integrated into whole-school approaches, not treated as an add-on or extra-curricular activity.
- Intentional use of school grounds to enhance biodiversity and to allow for outdoor learning and growing food.
- More structured support to Early Childhood educators in their role in preparing young children ahead of transitioning to formal education, via Initial Teacher Education and Continuous Professional Development.
- Whole-school, values-led approaches: Connect GCE to school mission, ethos and the broader purpose of education, emphasising hope, justice, sustainability and democratic participation.
- Strengthening of youth voice and children's rights: Create genuine, decision-making opportunities for young people to influence what and how they learn, ensuring their participation is meaningful rather than tokenistic.
- Supporting meaningful, action-oriented learning: Providing opportunities for volunteering, community engagement and real-world problem-solving that move beyond discussion to informed, courageous action on local and global issues.
- Fostering collaboration and democratic skills: Place greater emphasis on teamwork, respectful dialogue and collective problem-solving to prepare students to shape shared futures.
- Investing in resources and capacity building: Increase funding, provide adequate materials, and build planning time into the school day to enable high-quality teaching and innovation.

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- Creating engaging, flexible learning environments: Design classrooms and methodologies that allow for movement, interaction and diverse learning strategies, recognising that students need active and participatory approaches.
  - Strengthening school-community partnerships: Involve frontline voices and NGOs to bring real-world perspectives into learning, highlight interconnected local-global issues, and demonstrate varied pathways to change.
  - Addressing structural and systemic barriers: Tackle root causes of local and global challenges, improve transport access to reduce absenteeism, enhance school-home liaison supports, and position education within wider economic and societal frameworks.
  - Encouraging multi-generational and community learning: Provide opportunities for intergenerational exchange and broader community engagement to enrich learning experiences.
  - Deeper alignment and complementarity with youth work approaches, while protecting the distinct nature of youth work.
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### **Who are we?**

The Irish Development Education Association ([IDEA](#)) is the national network for Global Citizenship Education (GCE) on the island of Ireland. We represent 114 [members](#), ranging from educational entities to NGOs to individuals, all of whom work to provide and promote GCE in formal, non-formal and informal educational settings across the island of Ireland. IDEA has a long track record of advocating for strengthened GCE policy and practice in Ireland, in Europe and globally. IDEA is an Irish Aid strategic partner for Global Citizenship Education. The survey answers and submission were co-produced by members of the IDEA Formal Education Working Group with inputs from IDEA member the National Youth Council of Ireland and support from IDEA staff.