

State Examinations Commission

Press Statement by the State Examinations Commission

Friday, 10th June 2005

The Commissioners of the State Examinations Commission met today. The Commissioners noted the recent public debate surrounding the operation of the examinations in the four schools in Navan, Co. Meath affected by the school bus tragedy on 23rd May 2005.

While the Commissioners are reluctant to enter into public debate for fear of adding to the controversy in the matter, they do feel however, that it is opportune to give some further information in relation to the Commission's actions in this matter.

Every year the Commission makes arrangements to accommodate examination candidates who suffer bereavement, injury, illness or other trauma either before or during their examinations.

The school bus tragedy in Co.Meath was of an uncommonly large scale and extent. Because of the number of examination candidates involved, the Commission engaged with the school authorities in order to assist the schools in conducting the examinations for their students. Following this engagement a suite of measures was put in place for the schools affected. These measures, announced by the Commissioners at a press conference to launch the 2004 Annual Report held prior to the commencement of the examinations, included flexibility for the schools in creating special centres, allowing candidates to take rest breaks during examinations and appointing additional superintendents where necessary. Special briefings were also held for the superintendents assigned to the examination centres in the four schools covering all of the issues likely to arise in the unusual circumstances. A senior Examinations and Assessment Manager was assigned specifically to the four schools in Navan to assist them in the conducting the exams in these unique circumstances. This officer is located in Navan for the duration of the examinations.

In addition to these measures and given the unusual scale of the bus tragedy and the proximity of the commencement of the examinations, the Commission decided to conduct a review of examination paper content within the bounds of what was possible given the short timeframe available. This review indicated that Leaving Certificate Higher Level English Paper 1, the first examination, included both visual and written material that might prove disturbing to some candidates in the particular circumstances that applied. A decision was taken to replace the paper in its entirety. In organising the examinations the Commission operates to very tight deadlines but was able to use the margin of safety built into the system to effect the replacement of the paper at a very late stage. The work involved in replacing this paper was significant, put the examinations system under extreme pressure and carried with it attendant risks. The Commission's capacity to fully replace a paper on a nationwide basis at short notice to meet the published timetable is constrained given the operational and security factors involved. It is considered that the action taken reflects the sensitivity and mindfulness of the Commission in response to the events in Navan.

In relation to Ordinary Level Junior Certificate English, the Commissioners have noted the public issues arising following the completion of the examination. The Commissioners do of course regret the upset caused to some candidates as a result of the material on this paper. This was certainly not intended.

The decision to issue a modified Leaving Certificate Ordinary Level Irish paper to candidates in the four second level schools in Navan was made in recognition of the upset experienced by the candidates following the Junior Cert Ordinary Level English Paper the previous day.

The Commissioners also note that examination papers, which are set a number of months in advance of the examinations, are based on the prescribed syllabus and are generally expected to reflect students' learning experience. Inevitably, therefore, students will encounter at school and in the examinations situation, written texts, as well as aural and visual material, related to matters that may, at the time, impact on their lives – for example, accidents, violence, drug abuse, crime, or poverty. While every effort is made to avoid the inclusion of material that might cause offence or upset, it is not possible to exclude from examinations all reference to subjects and topics that might be associated with a traumatic experience for some candidates.

Finally, the review of policies and procedures that is conducted at the end of every examination season will of course include a review of the practices and procedures involved in the setting of examination papers.

The Commission, as in previous years, will continue to do everything within its power to assist any candidate who is experiencing adversity in his or her life at examination time. The Commissioners would like to extend their best wishes to all examination candidates in completing the remainder of their examinations.

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