

# Minister 'won't be panicked' over 5,000 failed maths papers

## Maths

Ralph Riegel and Katherine Donnelly

**THE Government will resist calls from employers and the Opposition for a new action plan to combat poor Leaving Cert maths results.**

Almost 5,000 pupils failed maths in their exams this year, overwhelmingly at ordinary level, ruling them out of a raft of third-level courses.

However, Education Minister Batt O'Keefe yesterday insisted the Government would not be "panicked" into a knee-jerk reaction.

"It is important that we get this right - rather than panicking ourselves into a situation where perhaps we will deepen the crisis rather than eradicate it. The failure rate in maths is high but people have to understand that we have been moving and education takes time to evolve.

"We have introduced a new (maths) curriculum at primary school level and we want to follow that now into the second-level sector."

Mr O'Keefe was speaking as he returned to Ballincollig Community School in Cork, where his own children were pupils.

He said his department would stick with its carefully

planned strategy to improve students' performance in the subject and would not be pressured into quick-fix solutions.

"We want, in our calculations, and in the recommendations made to us by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), to do this properly. We want to ensure that by rolling this out, we test the experience."

### Concerns

The minister conceded there were "understandable concerns" over maths but said it was crucial the overall positive message of the 2008 Leaving Cert results was not lost.

He added: "I think it is very

important that, in all of this, we remember that the class of 2008 has maintained the very high standard of Leaving Cert results that have been in evidence in the past.

"I think it augurs very well for the future and the Irish economy going forward," he said.

The minister denied he was dumbing down the maths curriculum in an effort to improve the failure rate.

Adding its voice to the concerns over poor maths and science results, the American Chamber of Commerce said the issue "cannot be ignored."

"It is difficult to envisage how we are to achieve our national goal of becoming a research-

led economy with the current performance of students in the vital areas of maths and the sciences," said Chamber CEO Joanne Richardson.

"Questions must now be asked about our approach to these subjects across the education system, from primary to third level."

Labour education spokesman Ruairi Quinn said there was a need to change the perception amongst students that maths and science subjects were difficult and poorly rewarded.

He said only radical "root-and-branch" reform of maths, that challenged the way students learned as well as what they studied, could have a

meaningful impact on students' perceptions of the subject.

"We need to shift the focus of maths away from rote learning and towards transferable skills for everyday life, for third level and for work," he added.

### Distressed

Meanwhile, an opposition TD last night called on the Government not to release Leaving Cert statistics before pupils had received their results.

Fine Gael's Kieran O'Donnell said many students were "distressed" by reports of the high maths failure rate without knowing their own result.

Mr O'Keefe said his department's Project Maths initiative

offered "exciting changes" to the approach to the subject at secondary level.

"The basis for Project Maths is that we want to change the emphasis on maths. We want to ensure that those students who are pursuing maths are pursuing a subject that has the mathematical concepts, but will also bring about a greater understanding of maths itself.

"In those circumstances, we are hoping we can ensure the participation rate at high level will go from 17pc to 30pc."

He said it would be introduced first at first year and fifth year so "in two years' time, we will have one strand of Project Maths at Leaving Cert level."

## Girl (19) is critical after car crash

A TEENAGE girl who was due to collect her Leaving Cert results, was critically ill in hospital last night after she was involved in a car accident, writes Katherine Hayes.

The 19-year-old suffered serious head injuries when her car went out of control in the early hours of yesterday morning.

The student was the sole occupant of the car, which crashed at around 3.30am outside Bruff, on the Croom Road in Co Limerick.

Units from the ambulance and fire services attended the scene, and the victim was taken to the Mid Western Regional Hospital in Dooradoyle, with serious head injuries.

A spokeswoman for the HSE described her condition yesterday as "critical".

Gardai closed the road for a few hours to allow a full technical examination.

## A-Team reveal secrets of their test success

Katherine Donnelly, Ralph Riegel and Anne Lucey

IT TAKES a lot of hard work too, but top Leaving Certificate student Orla Houlihan revealed relaxation played a crucial role in her stunning nine-A1 success.

And at least one of the 13 candidates close behind her put their eight-A1 achievements down to having luck on her side. Three of the 13 included a remarkable hat-trick from Christian Brothers College (CBC) Cork.

Orla (17), who attended Intermediate School, Killorglin, Co Kerry, said taking regular breaks from study was key to her winning combination.

"I hung out with my friends and I did tae kwon-do. It's good to be able to burn off energy. I play the piano which always relaxes me too," said Orla, who has secured her place in medicine at University College Cork (UCC).

The trio from Cork CBC - Kevin O'Keefe, Mark Moriarty and Ian Chisholm - credited their "fierce" maths teacher Anne Barry-Murphy with their class's great result in Maths.

Other Cork students who scored eight A1s were Kenneth Howick, Skehard Road, at Colaiste Christ Ri; Eabhann O'Connor, Glanmire, at St Aloysius in Carrigtwohill; and Kate McCutcheon, Model Farm Road, at Mount Mercy.

Kenneth hopes to study pharmacy at UCC while Kate, a member of the Irish team at the recent International Maths Olympiad, plans to study maths at Cambridge.

Despite a few sleepless nights at the start of the Leaving Certificate, 18-year-old Sinead Newsholme, Skerries Community College, Co Dublin, went on to score eight A1s. Her next step is a degree in medicine at UCD.

Dearbhla Doherty (18) puts her eight A1s down to "mostly luck, or about 50:50 work and luck, great teachers and a great school", said the Muckross Park College, Donnybrook, past pupil.

Dearbhla, of Upper Rathmines Road, Dublin, now plans to follow a family tradition - medicine in UCD.

Conor Leahy waited until he knew most other students would be gone before he ventured to Templeogue College, Dublin yesterday.

"I would be the first to say that exam results aren't everything," he said.

Word was out in the school that a student had achieved the maximum 600 points and his friends "who were running out of people to put it on, were waiting for me when I arrived," said Conor, who will study English at Trinity.

### Excellence

Even before yesterday's results, Liam Townsend (18), Lucan, Co Dublin, had a track record in excellence, having brought honour as an athlete and a junior and senior rugby player.

The gold-medal debater is going to study medicine in TCD. Also bound for medicine in Trinity is Craig MacLiathain (18), Newcastle, Galway, a former pupil at Colaiste na Coiribe, who has ensured his dream third-level college place - living away from home and in TCD's Irish-speaking student quarters.

Sinead Cawley, Kintogher, Sligo, admits to having been a "pretty dedicated" student but "can't believe it". Sinead will study biomedical science at UCD.

Robert Murphy (17), Ennis, is happy that the anticipation is taken out of the wait for the first round of CAO offers and is off to University College Cork to study medicine.

### Top of the class: The students who achieved eight A1s (and Orla Houlihan, who got nine)

Orla Houlihan



School: Intermediate School, Killorglin, Co Kerry

Sinead Cawley



School: Mercy College, Sligo

Ian Chisholm



School: Christian Brothers College, Cork

Mark Moriarty



School: Christian Brothers College, Cork

Kevin O'Keefe



School: Christian Brothers College, Cork

Kate McCutcheon



School: Mount Mercy, Cork

Kenneth Howick



School: Colaiste Christ Ri, Cork

Eabhann O'Connor



School: St Aloysius, Carrigtwohill, Co Cork

Robert Murphy



School: Rice Collage Ennis, Co Clare

Craig Mac Liathain



School: Colaiste na Coiribe, Galway

Sinead Newsholme



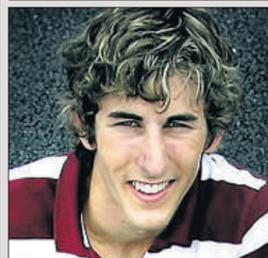
School: Skerries Community College, Co Dublin

Conor Leahy



School: Templeogue College, Dublin

Liam Townsend



School: Castlknock College, Dublin

Dearbhla Doherty



School: Muckross Park College, Donnybrook, Dublin

## Celebrations turn to reflection as 'life's around corner' Colleges face

### Exam diary

Mark Roche

RESULTS Day, August 13. Unlucky for some, maybe, but thankfully not for me!

Yesterday morning, I woke from a very deep sleep and headed down to the school to pick up that little brown envelope.

Surprisingly, tension was absent from the school hallways as we waited for our results.

Many of us were laughing, planning the night ahead and bantering as if it was a regular day of school.

The principal arrived not long after to hand us all our results. He tried to calm some of the nerves by telling us nobody had done terribly and that he was pleased with everybody.

My hands began to tremble as I opened the envelope. Shaking hard, I began to read. A smile then crept across my face.

There was a sudden rush to the chart on the wall listing the corresponding points for grades. A number of people started maniacally pushing buttons on their phones, adding points to see if they had got exactly what they wanted.

Most were thoroughly impressed by their results,

doing much better than in the pre-exams.

Although, points-wise, I am a little shy of the mark for my number-one course, I am confident if I don't get a round-two offer, I will still end up with a similar course.

I was probably most happy with my English and History results, getting an A2 and B respectively. Everything else was mediocre, B's and C's scattered here and there, with a dash of D for my worst subjects.

Remember my fear of Accounting? It turns out I was right - I was absolutely abysmal, and I'm not afraid to say it either. I'm not fazed by it. It

was my seventh subject and it won't affect my points.

As soon as I stepped outside the school, there was a photographer waiting to capture our emotions as we left. He said we were slightly more composed and more fun than our "overwhelmed" female colleagues he had visited earlier.

### Momentous

So now, finally, the momentous day we all waited for is over and it's the morning after the night before.

I'm sure half the students who celebrated last night are still soundly sleeping in their beds, whether they celebrated

Remember my fear of Accounting? It turns out I was right - I was absolutely abysmal

with classmates or family.

Me, I opted for a get-together with a small group of friends.

A good night was had by all, as they say. Pity the pubs insisted on closing at 11.30pm though. Today, with muggy heads, we begin carefully weighing up our options.

And for those of us who are slightly more fond of home than others, we'll have to deal with the reality that moving away and starting our own life is just around the corner.

● Mark Roche wrote the 'Exam Diary' for the *Irish Independent* in June. He was a student at the CBS, Carrick-on-Suir, Co Tipperary

## Colleges face probe over €2bn spending

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to make sure that the senior people in our universities who are the most professional, (who) have the greatest experience and who can make a valuable contribution to students, are actually in the classroom from time to time," he said.

The revelation of the audit comes as Mr O'Keefe insisted no changes would be made to the college fees structure for at least two years - despite his controversial re-opening of the debate on tuition fees.

The minister stressed that any changes to the structure would only be undertaken as part of a wide-ranging overhaul of Ireland's entire third-level infrastructure.

"They (the colleges and universities) are saying that they do not have adequate funds - but I am looking at exactly what funds we have put into the third-level sector," Mr O'Keefe said.

"We have already increased funding by 25pc in three years - that is an outstanding achievement. But people have been critical of the HSE and the amount of funding that has

been put into the HSE, and have questioned exactly what has been attained from that funding.

"I, as minister, want to carry out an audit on the third-level sector and I am going to have a look at a number of the institutions and to see how they are performing, how the money is targeted and if we are getting the benefits from it," Mr O'Keefe added.

He said that third-level institutions who were using their funding to maximum benefit had nothing to fear from the audit.

"I also want to see that money is targeted towards students, student services and social inclusion," he added.

The minister stressed that while progress had been achieved in terms of social inclusion at third level, much more needed to be done in the area.

"People have got to understand what we are at here - I want a national debate on the entire third-level sector. This sector is the fulcrum for the future growth of our economy for the production of jobs and innovation," he said.

## Mum and daughter celebrate their double Leaving success

Anita Guidera

A MOTHER and daughter who went back to school had cause for double celebration last night after both passed their exams with flying colours.

Sheila (48) and Lisa (21) Wright, who are from Co Donegal, were over the moon after passing the six

subjects they each sat and securing places on a two-year Higher National Diploma course in Derry.

Lisa was encouraged by her mum to return to education and sit her Leaving Certificate as a mature student at Letterkenny VEC.

"My mum was my rock. It was her idea for me to go back to school, and I am so glad I did it. It is all

worthwhile when you get these results in your hands," said a delighted Lisa.

Mum Sheila was equally delighted at her result. "I am just elated. It sure as hell boosts your confidence," she said.

Sheila admitted that the initial return to school was tough. "But they made you feel so at home and once you were in there you felt like one of the gang," she said.



Martin Gormely, adult education officer with Donegal VEC, with Lisa (21) and Sheila (48) Wright, from Co Donegal, who passed the six subjects they each sat with flying colours. CONOR MCGONAGLE