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Year In, Year Out

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Year in, year out

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It wasn't a great year in Irish education, and things may get worse before they get better. So who made waves in 2011, who is waving it good riddance, and who is set to make an impact in 2012? **SEÁN FLYNN**, Education Editor, makes 10 predictions

WHAT NEXT? EDUCATION IN 2012

1 Ruairí Quinn will continue to dominate the agenda

Quinn has had a very good eight months as Minister for Education. He has been energetic and reforming, and has brought a critical perspective to Irish education, describing the disappointing OECD rankings as a "wake-up call" for the education system.

Critically, he has also encouraged senior Department officials to engage in some (long overdue) "blue-sky" thinking on issues such as school patronage, exam reform, school admission policies and accountability.

There was very serious blip – that embarrassing pre-election pledge in which he ruled out fees – but otherwise Quinn has been one of the most innovative and impressive education ministers in a generation.

Many in education would like him to complete a full five-year term. He has already signalled he will remain in Marlborough Street until the mid-term Cabinet reshuffle, probably in the summer of 2013. Despite his age – Quinn is 65 – he still harbours ambitions of becoming the first Labour Party member to be appointed as Ireland's EU commissioner. And it could happen.

2 We will find out how standards in our primary schools compare with abroad

Last April, the international assessments on maths, literacy and science took place in a number of randomly selected primary schools in fourth class. Results will be available sometime in 2012. Almost all schools invited to participate did so and there was also a very high return rate on the questionnaires. Results are eagerly awaited.

3 The new Secretary General of the Department of Education will be under pressure to deliver

The OECD ranking which tracked the steep decline in literacy standards in Ireland will dominate the agenda of the new secretary general. Those dismal OECD results (which also delivered poor results in maths and science) came after a decade of unprecedented investment in Irish education and the recruitment of thousands of teachers. The new secretary general – due to be named early in 2012 – will be under pressure to raise Ireland's game.

4 Irish universities will continue to slide down the rankings

Six of the seven Irish universities slipped in the world rankings this year. For the first time Ireland has no university in the world top 100. Expect a further drop in 2012 as more cutbacks at a time of record student enrolment edges the system close to breaking point.

5 The following people will make a big impact

Aodhan O Riordan, labour backbencher who has the ear of Ruairí Quinn. Stephen Donnelly, Harvard educated independent TD, exceptionally well-informed on education issues. Philip Nolan, new president of NUI Maynooth, former deputy president at UCD.

6 Section 37 of the Employment Equality Act will come under increasing scrutiny Gay and bisexual teachers feel threatened by this law which could allow school managements to dismiss teachers in order to protect their ethos.

7 Speculation will begin about Hugh Brady's successor as UCD president

Brady is due to retire in 13 months. Early frontrunners to succeed him include; Mark Rogers, Registrar Deputy President; Ciarán

ÓhÓgartaigh, head of the College of Business; and Des Fitzgerald, vice president, Research. But will any current university president apply?

8 The Easter teacher conferences will be uneventful

You've heard of a conference in search an agenda? That could be the case at the teacher conferences next year. With the Croke Park Agreement in place until 2014, there are no live pay issues and little else which will draw headlines.

9 Progress on a change in school patronage will be painfully slow

Ruairí Quin says he hopes 1,500 Catholic primary schools will be divested. But with public opinion to be canvassed and legal issues to be addressed we could be waiting.

10 Leaving and Junior Cert will be distracted by wild public celebrations

as Robbie Keane scores for Ireland against Spain in Euro 2012. The exams begin in early June just as the soccer championship kicks off.

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