



# Senior Cycle Review

## Pathways and flexibility









# Foreword



In 2018, forty-one post-primary schools embarked on an ambitious project to review senior cycle education in Ireland. Having formulated and shared their thinking with the NCCA and the country on the **purpose** of senior cycle education (cycle 1), teachers, students and parents began to explore **pathways and flexibility** in senior cycle (cycle 2). A second series of national seminars in Limerick, Athlone, Waterford and Sligo provided further opportunities for exploration and discussion. What follows is a snapshot of the rich tapestry of thoughts and ideas which emerged as review participants discussed current pathways and flexibility and began to suggest future directions senior cycle education might take. We also invite you to read the ESRI's full report on cycle 2 of the school review *Senior Cycle Review: analysis of discussions in schools on senior cycle pathways and structures in Ireland* will be published in early May at **[ncca.ie/seniorcycle](https://ncca.ie/seniorcycle)**.

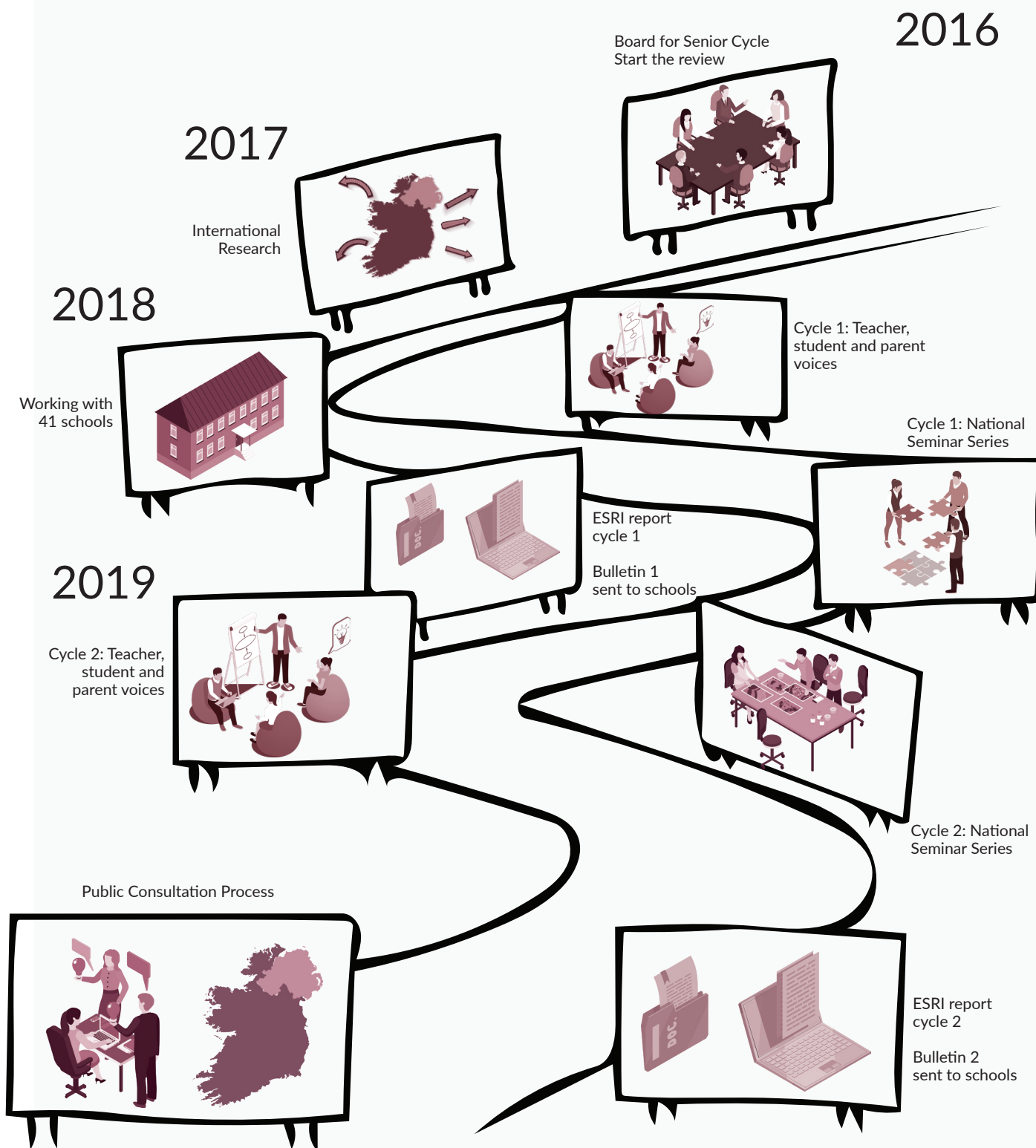
The conversation is open, and ideas are still emerging. If you would like to join the conversation, please make your voice heard by getting involved in our public consultation on ideas emerging from the review. Take part in a focus group meeting, complete our online survey or make a written submission.

Keep an eye on **[ncca.ie/seniorcycle](https://ncca.ie/seniorcycle)** for more details.



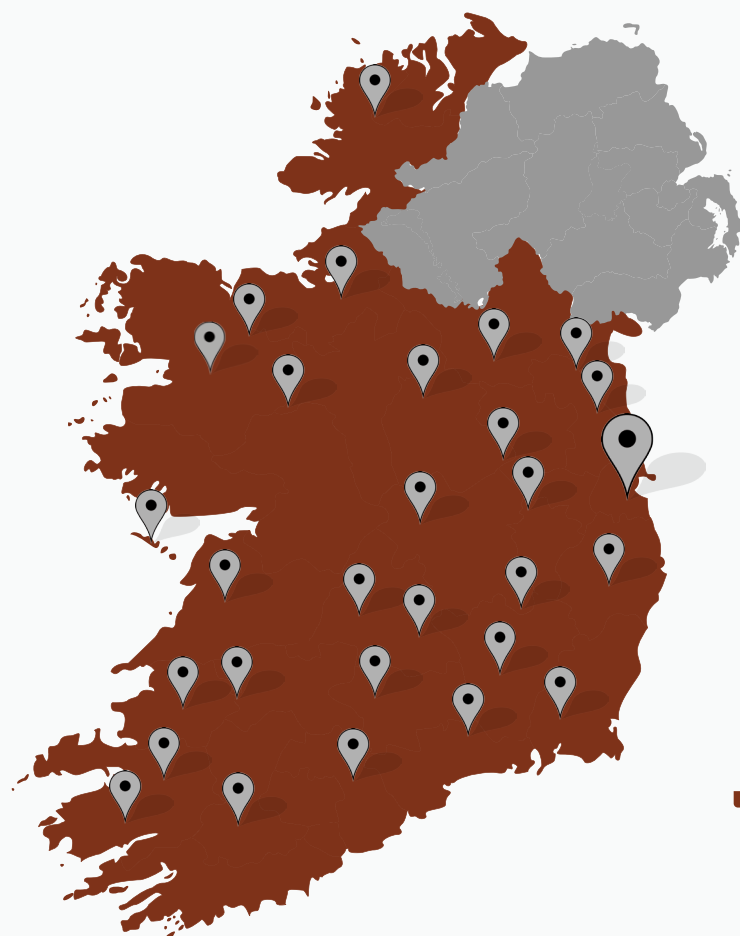


# Senior Cycle Review Timeline: Process to date





# Collaboration & Participation in Senior Cycle Review



## 41 Schools

+ 9 additional schools

SCHOOL GENDER

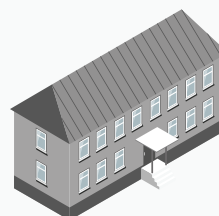


**Female** 9

**Male** 7

**Mixed** 25

TYPE OF SCHOOL



**Secondary** 22

**ETB** 12

**Special School** 2

**C&C** 5

**DEIS** 11

**Lán-Ghaeilge** 4

## 7 National Seminars

## 616 attendees

## 9



Research from jurisdictions

## 2 ESRI Research Papers

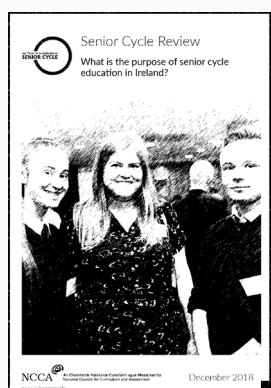


**Cork**  
**Limerick**  
**Waterford**  
**Galway**  
**Dublin**  
**Athlone**  
**Sligo**

## Senior Cycle Review Bulletins

Sent to **715** Post-primary schools

**195** Stakeholders



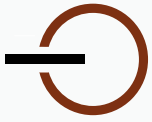
Email Submissions



## 24



#seniorcyclereview



## What emerged from cycle 1 of senior cycle review?

During cycle 1 of this review, teachers, students and parents affirmed the moral purpose of senior cycle education, to help every student towards fulfilling their full potential. Empowering every student to deepen their knowledge and skills as they mature and develop personally and build towards diverse futures was suggested as the core purpose of senior cycle education, such that every student can embrace full citizenship and participation in society and the economy as they transition to life beyond school. Strengths and challenges in the current senior cycle were identified and suggestions began to emerge as to how senior cycle might evolve in the future.

Opportunities to apply knowledge along with the capacities young people should gain from their time in senior cycle were explored.

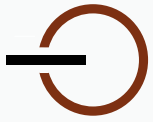
- Higher-order questioning; critical thinking and analysis; problem solving and information processing; independent and collaborative learning; creativity and innovation; and skills in the areas of research, writing, communication, presentation and digital technologies were all seen as important
- A range of intrapersonal and interpersonal capacities students should have opportunities to develop as they learn were highlighted, including resilience, self-respect, self-acceptance and confidence, compassion, empathy, responsibility, self-management and organisation, teamwork, curiosity and a love of learning

- Life skills such as financial management, the ability to navigate the digital world, knowledge and understanding of relationships and sexuality and of the working world were suggested as part of the education every student should have before they leave school.

A strong desire emerged for improved continuity and coherence as students transition from senior cycle to a diverse range of future destinations. Career guidance, work experience and subject choice were seen as important supports in achieving this. Varied teaching and learning methods, including class discussions, peer learning, pair and group work were affirmed, as were varied assessment approaches, including project-work, portfolio-based work and opportunities for oral communication of learning, such as interviews. Mixed views were expressed about continuity between the new junior cycle and the existing senior cycle, and the extent to which changes to senior cycle should align fully with developments at junior cycle.







## What did teachers, students and parents talk about in cycle 2 of the review?

What works well in TY/LCA/LCVP/LCE?

Should senior cycle be structured as subjects, modules, units or a mix?

What are the main challenges?

Should some areas/experiences be studied by all?

How long should senior cycle last?

Are suitable pathways available to all students?

Could students complete senior cycle at different paces?

Would you suggest any changes to assessment?

Would you suggest any changes to reporting?

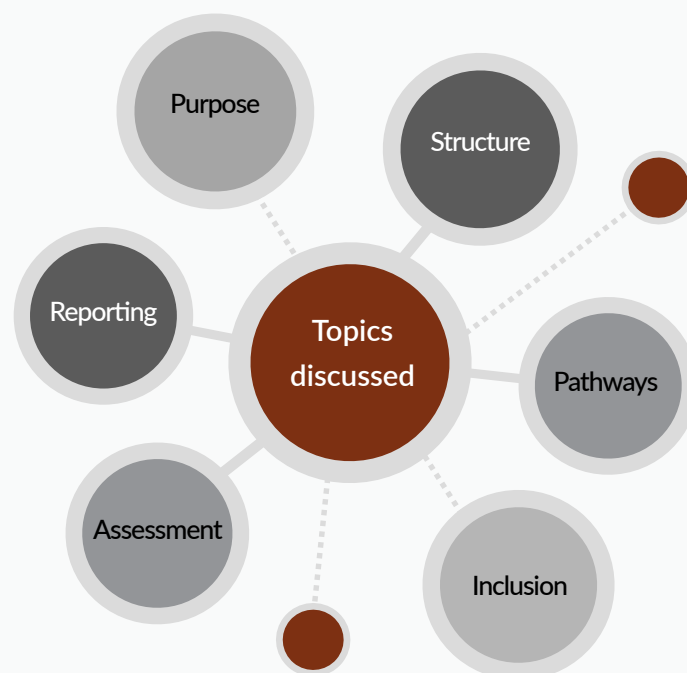


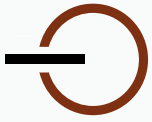


## National Seminars

Feedback from cycle 1 seminars in Cork, Galway and Dublin in November 2018 was mostly positive with participants saying they would have liked more time for discussion and for feedback to be recorded and incorporated into the review. This fed into the design of cycle 2 seminars which were built around table discussions and gathering of further feedback. These seminars took place in February 2019 in Limerick, Athlone, Waterford and Sligo.

Expressions of interest to attend the national seminar series were sought through the first senior cycle review bulletin, which was posted to all post-primary schools nationwide and through an open invitation on twitter and facebook. Thanks to all who got in touch. We were delighted to be able to facilitate all requests to attend the national seminars- many thanks to all who participated. You can read a summary of feedback from the national seminars at [ncca.ie/seniorcycle](https://ncca.ie/seniorcycle)





## What emerged from cycle 2 of senior cycle review?

**Teachers, students and parents and attendees at national seminars identified strengths in the current senior cycle, explored challenges to achieving the broad purposes of senior cycle education and made some suggestions for potential changes to this phase of education.**

### **Structure**

Discussions of structure revolved around three key questions. How long should it be? Should students have the flexibility to complete it to differing timeframes? What curriculum components should be available?

There were different views as to how long students should spend in senior cycle, with two or three years seen as an appropriate length for this phase of education. Whilst three years was seen as helpful for many students, it was suggested that students at this stage in their lives should have the choice to condense senior cycle into two years; to expand it to three years; or, if suited to their needs, to leave after one year, with the option to return to senior cycle or further education at a later date. It was suggested that students can benefit from the flexibility to complete senior cycle to differing timeframes.

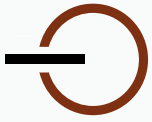
The importance of subjects was affirmed during the review and flexibility for students to combine full subjects with learning of a shorter duration in a range of areas was seen as important. Review participants used different terms to describe this shorter-duration learning. The term modules was used, perhaps reflecting existing modularisation practices such as TY modules, LCA modules and LCVP link modules. Some used the term units of learning; others referred to major and minor subjects.



Whatever language is used, the current structure of senior cycle is seen as too rigid and student choice in selection of subjects for the Leaving Certificate Established is seen as too restrictive.

There were differing views on which curriculum components, if any, should be compulsory for all students, with English/literacy, mathematics/numeracy and life skills most frequently mentioned. Digital literacy; financial literacy; work experience; relationships and sexuality education; citizenship and political education; Gaeilge and/or Gaeilge language and culture; sustainability and climate change education; culture and multiculturalism; and opportunities for interdisciplinary learning were among the curriculum components proposed but there was significant variation in what was suggested and whether participants thought these areas should be optional or compulsory. Some email submissions emphasised the importance of retaining Gaeilge as a compulsory subject.





# What emerged from cycle 2 of senior cycle review?

## **Pathways and programmes**

The main question explored in relation to pathways, programmes and flexibility was the extent to which all students facing senior cycle have suitable pathways and learning experiences available to them.

Mixed views were expressed in relation to the suitability of the pathways and learning experiences available to students. The many strengths of current programmes were identified during this review, including rich opportunities to mature and develop personally during transition year; the wide range of subjects and learning experiences available in TY; the subject choices available in LCE including new subject areas; the modules offered in LCVP and LCA and work experience opportunities in TY, LCA and LCVP.

Some of the challenges identified included lack of access to technical, vocational, creative and professional learning; over-emphasis on a single pathway (the Leaving Certificate Established); lack of flexibility to combine aspects of different programmes; the absence of a follow-on pathway for students who access learning at level 1 and level 2 in junior cycle; and insufficient supports for student progression to a range of future pathways, with an over-emphasis on progression to third level. Greater flexibility to allow students to navigate different pathways through senior cycle was seen as desirable.



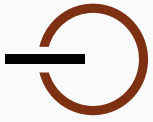
## **Inclusion and wellbeing**

The main question explored in the area of wellbeing and inclusion was the extent to which teaching and learning at senior cycle is inclusive of all backgrounds, talents and abilities and contributes towards all students achieving their full potential.

Many positive factors which can enhance inclusion and wellbeing were highlighted during this review, including an open and supportive school climate; supportive teacher-student relationships; work experience and career guidance; high quality teaching; high quality CPD and teacher collaboration. Factors which can negatively impact on inclusion and wellbeing include curriculum overload across seven subjects; excessive focus on terminal examinations leading to narrowing of teaching and learning approaches, high stress and/or disengagement for many students; heavy workload; and concerns about the future.

There were differing views on the extent to which the current senior cycle is inclusive of all students. Transition year is seen as most inclusive of a wide range of talents and abilities; it was suggested that this is less evident as students progress through senior cycle with a narrower range of abilities being valued and less recognition for the learning students achieve in LCA and LCVP. Concerns were expressed that students who wish to transition from senior cycle education to apprenticeships, traineeships and further training and employment are not adequately supported. It was also suggested that increased attention is needed to inclusion of all students. Review participants particularly mentioned students with SEN, students for whom English is an additional language and students from the Traveller community.

Participants in the review suggested that increased attention to wellbeing and inclusion in senior cycle education is needed.



# What emerged from cycle 2 of senior cycle review?

## Assessment



Discussions revolved around strengths and challenges in current senior cycle approaches to assessment and possible areas for further development.

Strengths in current assessment arrangements in senior cycle include high levels of public trust in external assessment; the variety of assessment approaches currently used; and assessment being spread out over time, as experienced in a number of senior cycle programmes. Challenges include high stress levels for many students; assessment condensed in a narrow timeframe in LCE; limited second chance opportunities for students; and the impact of high stakes assessment on teaching and learning, with a perception that terminal assessment can contribute to over-reliance on memorisation, rote learning of sample answers, and a grinds culture.

Teachers, students, parents and seminar attendees suggested that assessment in senior cycle, at its most valid, values a wide range of knowledge and skills and a variety of ways of displaying learning. Greater flexibility in spreading out assessment over time is needed. Assessment should support the broad purposes of senior cycle and align with teaching and learning in ongoing classroom interactions between teachers and students.



## Reporting and transitions

Discussions revolved around strengths and challenges in current senior cycle approaches to reporting and possible areas for further development.

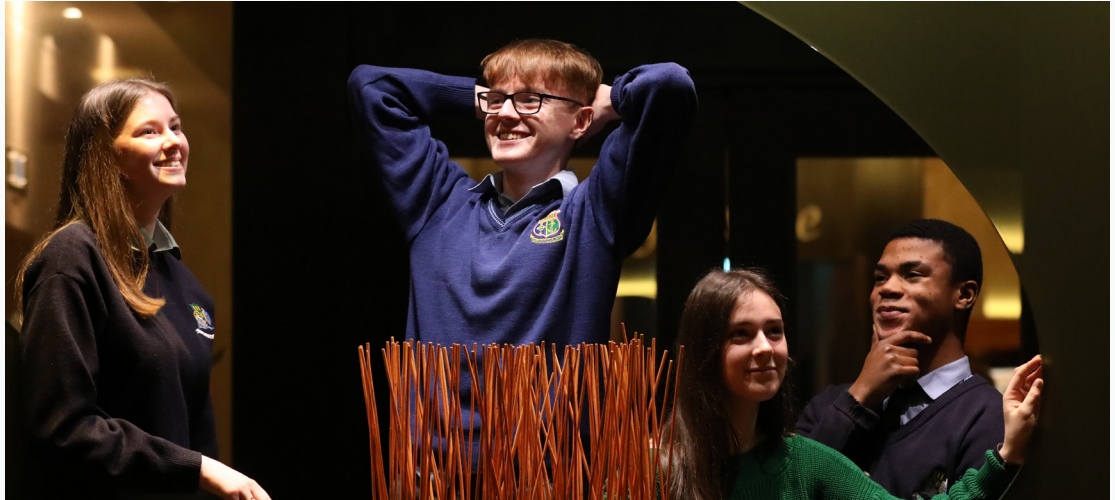
Strengths in senior cycle reporting include broad reporting of achievement in Transition Year and in the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, with some challenges in interpreting LCA reporting. Reporting of achievement in the Leaving Certificate Established programme through SEC certification and transition to higher education via the CAO system is broadly viewed as fair, impartial and transparent. It is also viewed as quite narrow, providing students, parents, future employers and educators with a limited picture of the knowledge, skills, abilities and aptitudes of students when they transition to the worlds of work, training and higher and further education.

Broader reporting could be of benefit to the large cohort of students who transition from school to apprenticeships, further education or training and employment or a combination of these future destinations, as well as students who transition to third level.

There was concern that the transition into fifth year (direct from junior cycle or from transition year), and from school to post-school destinations can be challenging due to a range of factors. There are insufficient supports for students transitioning to apprenticeships, traineeships and work. Teachers, students, parents and seminar attendees affirmed that student learning during senior cycle should help students to develop the capacities they need for adult life irrespective of their choice of post-school destination. These capacities were explored during cycle 1 of the review in discussions about the purpose of senior cycle education and are outlined above on pages 6 and 7.



## Next steps for Senior Cycle Review



The next step for senior cycle review is a public consultation on ideas emerging from the review. The conversation is open, and ideas are still emerging. If you would like to join the conversation, please make your voice heard by getting involved. Take part in a focus group meeting, complete our online survey or make a written submission. Keep an eye on **[ncca.ie/seniorcycle](https://ncca.ie/seniorcycle)** for more details.

Informed by this consultation and by all aspects of senior cycle review, recommendations for future developments in senior cycle education will be presented to the NCCA's Board for Senior Cycle and subsequently to Council, with the aim of providing advice to the Minister for Education arising from the senior cycle review process thus far.