FREE GUIDE FOR PARENTS · JUNIOR CYCLE TO LEAVING CERT

How to get your child into college

A plain-English guide to CAO points, entry requirements and the other ways in, from 2nd year to offer day.

- How CAO points really work
- The CAO year, date by date
- The subject choices that open (or close) doors
- HEAR, DARE, PLCs, apprenticeships and more
- A 2nd-to-6th-year checklist for the fridge

Facts checked in November 2026 on cao.ie, accesscollege.ie, nui.ie, qqi.ie, apprenticeship.ie and college admissions pages. Dates are for college entry in autumn 2027: always check the official sites, as they can change.

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The big picture in one page

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Most school leavers in Ireland apply to college through the **CAO** (Central Applications Office). Your child lists the courses they want **in order of preference**, sits the Leaving Cert, and is offered the highest course on their list that their points (and subjects) qualify them for.

1. Points
Each Leaving Cert grade is worth points. The **best six subjects** are added up. The maximum is 625.

2. Requirements
Points alone aren't enough. Every college has **minimum entry requirements**, and many courses need particular subjects.

3. Dates
Apply by **1 February** of 6th year. Final choices can be changed up to **1 July**. Offers come out in **late August**.

Three things many parents only find out too late

Subject choices made in 3rd year can close doors. Dropping a foreign language, or a science, or taking ordinary-level Maths can rule your child out of some courses, no matter how many points they get. See page 6.

Points for a course aren't set in advance. The "points" for a course are simply the score of the last person offered a place that year. They go up and down with demand, so last year's figure is a guide, not a promise.

The CAO isn't the only way in. Reduced-points places (HEAR and DARE), further education (PLC) courses, apprenticeships, the new tertiary degrees and mature entry all lead to college qualifications. See pages 7 and 8.

What's in this guide

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SECTION 1

How CAO points work

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Leaving Cert grades run from H1 to H8 at higher level and O1 to O8 at ordinary level. Each grade is a 10% band (H1 = 90–100%, H2 = 80–89%, and so on). This is the official CAO points scale, used since 2017:

Mark	Higher level	Points	Ordinary level	Points
90–100%	H1	**100**	O1	**56**
80–89%	H2	**88**	O2	**46**
70–79%	H3	**77**	O3	**37**
60–69%	H4	**66**	O4	**28**
50–59%	H5	**56**	O5	**20**
40–49%	H6	**46**	O6	**12**
30–39%	H7	**37**	O7	**0**
0–29%	H8	**0**	O8	**0**

The rules in plain English

- **Best six subjects** from one sitting of the Leaving Cert are added up. A 7th or 8th subject is a safety net, not extra points.
- A **H5 is worth the same as an O1** (56). Higher level pays off even with a middling grade.
- A **H7** (30–39%) still earns 37 points, so trying higher level is low-risk.
- Leaving Cert Vocational Programme (LCVP) Link Modules can count as a subject: Distinction 66, Merit 46, Pass 28.

The higher-level Maths bonus

A **H6 or better in higher-level Maths** (40%+) earns **25 bonus points**. A H1 in higher Maths is worth 125; a H6 is worth 71.

The bonus only counts if Maths is one of the best six subjects (it usually is). It's why the maximum is **625**, not 600.

There's ongoing debate about changing the bonus, but it still applies for 2027 entry.

Worked example

Aoife sits seven subjects. Her results: English H2 (88), Irish H3 (77), **higher Maths H4 (66 + 25 = 91)**, Spanish H3 (77), Biology H5 (56), Geography O1 (56), Business H6 (46).

Best six: 91 + 88 + 77 + 77 + 56 + 56 = **445 points**. Business (46) is her 7th subject, so it isn't counted.

Ranking courses, offers and rounds

How the course list works

Your child can list up to **10 Level 8** courses (honours degrees) and **10 Level 6/7** courses (higher certificates and ordinary degrees). The two lists are separate, so they can get one offer from each.

The golden rule: list courses in order of genuine preference. Don't leave a course off, or put it lower down, because you think the points will be too high. If they don't get it, the CAO simply moves on to the next course. Putting a "safe" course first only means they might get the safe course and miss the one they really wanted.

What "the points" for a course means

- The CAO fills each course by points, highest first. The **cut-off points** are the score of the last person offered a place.
- They change every year with the number of applicants and places. Use the last 2–3 years as a **rough guide**.
- An **asterisk (*)** next to the points means not everyone on that score got a place: some were chosen by **random selection**.
- Some courses add marks from a test, portfolio, interview or audition (e.g. the HPAT for undergraduate Medicine). These "restricted" courses usually must be on the CAO list by **1 February**.

Offers and rounds

Round	Who it's for
Round A (early July)	Mature applicants and some other non-school-leaver groups.
Round Zero (early Aug)	Mainly applicants with further education (QQI Level 5/6) awards, and more mature applicants.
Round One (late Aug)	Most Leaving Cert students: offers come a few days after results. In 2026, results came out on 21 August and Round One offers on 26 August.
Round Two and later	Places that weren't accepted are offered on, so points can drop a little. If your child accepts an offer and later gets a higher preference, they can still take the new one.

Offers must be **accepted online by the deadline** (usually within a week). A missed deadline means losing the offer.

The Leaving Cert is changing. Under Senior Cycle reform, every subject is being rewritten, and each new subject has an **Additional Assessment Component** (a project, investigation or practical) worth **at least 40%** of the marks, done during the two years. The first redeveloped subjects (including Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Business) started in September 2025 and are examined for the first time in **2027**. The new Maths and English courses have been **delayed until at least 2028**. More subjects follow each year. Ask your child's school which of their subjects are on the new course. The CAO points scale itself hasn't changed.

SECTION 2

The CAO year: key dates

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These are the dates for students applying in 6th year (2026/27) to start college in autumn 2027. The pattern is the same every year. Times are 5pm unless stated.

Date	What happens
5 Nov 2026 (noon)	**CAO opens** for 2027 applications at cao.ie. Your child can register now and add or change courses later.
20 Jan 2027	Last day for the **discounted fee of €35** (online).
1 Feb 2027	**Normal closing date** (fee €50). Also the deadline to **tick HEAR and/or DARE**, and to list "restricted" courses (tests, portfolios, auditions).
February	A short paid window to change courses opens a few days after 1 February.
1 Mar 2027	Deadline to finish the **HEAR and DARE online forms** (and the mature applicant section).
10 Mar 2027	HEAR and DARE **supporting documents** must reach the CAO (posted, signed and stamped). Late documents aren't accepted.
March–1 May	**Late applications** (higher fee; some courses can no longer be added).
Early May	**Change of Mind** opens. It's free. Most students finalise their list in May and June.
June	**Leaving Cert exams.** HEAR and DARE outcomes are emailed in late June.
1 Jul 2027	**Change of Mind closes.** After this, the course list is locked.
July–Aug	Round A (early July) and Round Zero (early August) offers for other groups.
Late Aug	**Leaving Cert results**, then **Round One offers** a few days later. Accept by the deadline.
Sept–Oct	Further rounds; Leaving Cert appeal results (late September); the offer season ends in early October.

Don't forget money. The CAO deals with places, not grants. Apply separately to **SUSI** (susi.ie) for a student grant. HEAR is **not** a grant either: families eligible for HEAR should usually apply to SUSI too.

Source: cao.ie (2027 application page), accesscollege.ie (HEAR and DARE 2027). Exact dates for 2027 results and offers will be confirmed by the SEC and CAO nearer the time.

SECTION 3

Minimum entry requirements

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To be offered a place, your child must have **enough points and meet the entry requirements**. There are two layers:

1. College minimum ("matriculation")
The basic standard for any course at that college. For example, the NUI universities (**UCC, UCD, University of Galway, Maynooth**) ask for **six subjects**, with at least **two H5s** and four at O6/H7, and **English and Irish** among them. Many technological universities ask for five or six passes (O6/H7), usually including Maths and English or Irish.

2. Course requirements
Extra subjects or grades for a particular course, e.g. a **third language**, a **laboratory science** (Biology, Chemistry, Physics…), or a set grade in **higher-level Maths**. Engineering at UCC, for example, asks for H4 in higher Maths; Dentistry and Pharmacy ask for H4 in Chemistry and in Physics or Biology.

The NUI "third language" rule

At the four NUI universities, many courses need a **third language** (a language as well as English and Irish, e.g. Spanish, French, German) among the six subjects. Examples from NUI's published rules:

Course area (NUI universities)	Language needed as well as English and Irish
Arts, Human Sciences, Law	A third language
Commerce	A third language **and** Maths
Social Science	A third language at UCC, Galway and Maynooth (not at UCD, which asks for Maths instead)
Science, Engineering, Nursing	Usually no third language, but often Maths and/or a lab science

Rules differ by college and course and can change: always check the course page and nui.ie.

Why this matters in Junior Cycle. Leaving Cert subjects and levels are usually chosen in **3rd year or Transition Year**, and schools often use Junior Cycle results to decide who takes higher level. A 14-year-old who drops their foreign language after Junior Cycle can find, at 17, that Arts, Law or Commerce at an NUI university is closed to them. Keeping a language, a science and the highest Maths level they can manage keeps the most doors open.

Exemptions from Irish or a third language

Some students can be exempt, for example if they were **born outside the Republic of Ireland**, received much of their education abroad, or have a **specific learning difficulty** (such as dyslexia) or another condition affecting language learning. For NUI universities, apply to NUI for the exemption (exemptions.nui.ie) and tick the box on the CAO form. An exemption from studying Irish in school doesn't count automatically: your child still has to apply to NUI, so check early. Some courses (e.g. primary teaching) need Irish whatever the exemption.

SECTION 4

Other ways in (1): HEAR and DARE

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HEAR and DARE are national access schemes run through the CAO. Colleges keep places for eligible applicants at **reduced points**, and offer extra support once they start. Your child must still meet the minimum entry and subject requirements. Both are for school leavers **under 23** (on 1 January of the year they start). Find out more at **accesscollege.ie**.

HEAR: Higher Education Access Route

For school leavers from backgrounds that are under-represented in college. Applicants must meet a **low-income** limit and are then scored on:

- a **medical card or GP visit card** in the family
- a **means-tested social welfare** payment for 26+ weeks
- living in an **area of concentrated disadvantage**
- five years in a **DEIS** secondary school

Care-experienced, Traveller and Roma applicants and young parents are priority groups.

DARE: Disability Access Route to Education

For school leavers whose **disability** has had a negative effect on their second-level education: for example autism, ADHD, dyslexia, a mental health condition, a physical or sensory disability, or a significant ongoing illness.

They need both **evidence of the disability** (a form or report from a professional) and an **Educational Impact Statement** completed with the school.

Even students who aren't eligible for DARE can get disability supports in college.

How to apply (both schemes)

By 1 February	Apply to the CAO and say yes to HEAR and/or DARE.
By 1 March	Complete the online form in the CAO account.
By 10 March	Post the supporting documents (signed and stamped) to the CAO.
Late June	The outcome is emailed. Eligible students compete for reduced-points places in Round One.

Start gathering documents in the autumn of 6th year. Reports, school forms and income documents take time, and late documents aren't accepted. Your child's guidance counsellor can help.

SECTION 4 (CONTINUED)

Other ways in (2): more routes to a degree

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PLC courses → college (QQI Level 5 or 6)

Post-Leaving Cert (PLC) courses run in colleges of further education, usually for one year. A full **QQI Level 5 or 6** award can be used to apply through the CAO under the **Higher Education Links Scheme**. Results are scored to a maximum of **390 points**, and colleges keep places for these applicants, including on some high-points courses. A PLC can also be a way to try a subject area first, or to get around a missing subject requirement where the course accepts a linked award. Apply directly to the further education college (most open applications in spring).

Tertiary degrees: start local, finish at university

A newer route: a **full bachelor's degree** that starts in a local further education college and finishes in a university or technological university. **No CAO points** are needed and there are **no fees for the first year or two**. There are 78 for 2026/27 (e.g. Business, IT, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Agricultural Science and a new Primary Teaching route). Apply through nto.hea.ie or fetchcourses.ie, not the CAO.

Apprenticeships: earn while you learn

There are **87 apprenticeships** in Ireland, from electrician and chef to accounting, software, insurance and paramedic, leading to qualifications up to **degree level and beyond**. The apprentice is **employed and paid**, with time in college as well. The key step is getting hired by an **approved employer**: jobs are listed on **apprenticeship.ie**. Entry rules vary. Craft trades start at 16 with Junior Cycle results; many newer apprenticeships ask for five Leaving Cert passes including Maths and English or Irish.

Access and foundation courses

Many colleges run free or low-cost **access programmes** (often one year) that prepare students for degree study and can lead to a reserved place. Check the "access" pages of the colleges near you.

Mature entry

Anyone who is **23 or older on 1 January** of the year they start can apply as a mature student through the CAO. Places are offered on experience, motivation and interview or test, not just Leaving Cert points. It's worth knowing: missing out at 18 doesn't close college for good.

The bottom line: if your child doesn't get the points they hoped for, there is almost always another route to the same career. A good guidance counsellor can map it out with them.

SECTION 5

What to do when: 2nd year to 6th year

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Stick this on the fridge. Tick as you go.

2nd year	☐ Chat about what they enjoy and are good at. No decisions yet, just curiosity. ☐ Try a careers interest quiz together on careersportal.ie. ☐ Notice which subjects feel like "keepers" (a language, a science, Maths level).
3rd year	☐ Before Leaving Cert subject choices: look up 3–4 courses they might like on qualifax.ie or college sites and check the **required subjects**. ☐ Think hard before dropping a **foreign language** (NUI third language rule, page 6) or all the **sciences**. ☐ Aim for **higher level** in Junior Cycle Maths, English and Irish where possible: it keeps higher level open. ☐ If your child may need an exemption from Irish, find out how it works now. ☐ Decide on Transition Year.
TY / 5th year	☐ Use work experience to test-drive careers. ☐ Go to college **open days** (autumn and spring) and CAO/careers fairs. ☐ Watch levels: switching to ordinary level is easy to do but can close courses. ☐ If HEAR or DARE might apply, read accesscollege.ie now.
6th year: autumn	☐ **CAO opens 5 November**: register early (it's only €35 before 20 January). ☐ Start gathering HEAR/DARE documents. Book any HPAT, portfolio or audition. ☐ Look at PLC courses, tertiary degrees and apprenticeships as real options, not just back-ups.
6th year: Jan–Mar	☐ **20 Jan** discounted fee · **1 Feb** CAO closes (tick HEAR/DARE, list restricted courses). ☐ **1 Mar** HEAR/DARE forms · **10 Mar** documents to the CAO. ☐ Apply to PLC colleges and apprenticeship employers if interested.
6th year: May–July	☐ Use the free **Change of Mind** to put courses in **genuine order of preference**. ☐ Check the list is final before **1 July at 5pm**. ☐ Apply for a **SUSI grant** if eligible.
August	☐ Results day: celebrate whatever happens, then look at the options calmly. ☐ **Accept the offer online by the deadline.** Watch for Round Two. ☐ No offer? Check available places on cao.ie, PLCs and apprenticeships.

WHERE TO CHECK

Official websites and a note from Léim

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Website	Use it for
cao.ie	Applying, the CAO Handbook, dates, fees, points from past years
accesscollege.ie	HEAR and DARE: who can apply, forms and deadlines
nui.ie	Entry requirements for UCC, UCD, University of Galway and Maynooth; Irish and third-language exemptions
qqi.ie and **fetchcourses.ie**	PLC courses and the Higher Education Links Scheme
apprenticeship.ie	All apprenticeships, entry rules and employers hiring now
susi.ie	Student grants
careersportal.ie and **qualifax.ie**	Course search, careers quizzes and points calculators
examinations.ie	Leaving Cert exam timetables, results and appeals (SEC)
ncca.ie	The Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle courses, including the Leaving Cert changes

How this guide was checked: every fact was checked in November 2026 against the official sites above and college admissions pages (UCC, TU Dublin, the HEA). Dates are for students applying in 2026/27 for college in 2027. Rules and dates can change, so always confirm on the official site before a deadline. This guide is general information, not individual advice: your child's guidance counsellor knows their situation best.

About Léim. Léim (it means "leap") is an Irish online revision school for Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert students, starting with Junior Cycle. Students revise with short, free games mapped to the official learning outcomes, then check the rules and print a free revision sheet. Parents sign up; students never need an account.

For your child

Free revision games at **leim.ie**: play first, then revise the rules. Junior Cycle Spanish is live now, with Maths next.

For you

You'll get short, useful emails from Léim: exam dates, revision tips and new subjects as they open. Unsubscribe any time.

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