



Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment Information for Schools





Information for schools



The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is reviewing and redeveloping the primary school curriculum. Since its launch in 1999 and through the dedicated work of teachers, principals and parents, the curriculum has helped over one million children to learn and develop. It was a cutting-edge curriculum providing a strong foundation for teaching and learning. Much has changed, however, in the twenty years since. We now know more about how children learn and what it is like to be a child growing up in Ireland. Society, too, has changing expectations of a primary education. And so, we need to ensure that the curriculum can continue to provide children with relevant and engaging experiences.

The NCCA is working with teachers and early childhood practitioners, school leaders, parents and children, management bodies, researchers and other stakeholders to develop a high-quality curriculum for the next 10-15 years. This information booklet outlines why we are revisiting the curriculum, the work to date, what we are hearing, and the next steps. Importantly, it suggests **how you and your school can get involved**. As a teacher in the Schools Forum put it, *it's [the work] about a common interest in and passion for shaping an outstanding curriculum that will best serve the lives of Irish children for the years to come.*



Why we are reviewing the Primary Curriculum

Many successes are associated with the 1999 curriculum. These include children's enjoyment of learning, an increased use of active methodologies, sustained support for children with additional needs, and improved attainment levels in reading, mathematics and science as evidenced in national and international assessments. But challenges too have been well documented, e.g. curriculum overload, the challenge of supporting all children as learners, and the difficulties of assessment and reporting on children's learning.

As well as the need to respond to challenges, there have also been calls for the primary curriculum to simply do more! In particular, there have been requests to include new areas of learning such as: Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, coding and computational thinking, and modern foreign languages. There are also requests for greater attention to existing areas such as wellbeing (including Social, Personal and Health Education, and Physical Education). In addition, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (2011)* set out a curriculum reform agenda which led to the development of the new Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga Bunscoile and to work on a new mathematics curriculum.

The provision of two years of universal preschool education, the publication of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009)* and the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) have led to changes in what children experience before beginning primary school and in what and how they learn on leaving primary school.

This creates a need to look again at the primary curriculum and to ensure that it builds on what children bring to school and that it connects with their post-primary experience while recognising the uniqueness and importance of a primary education in a child's learning journey.



Why we are reviewing the Primary Curriculum

Irish society has seen unprecedented change since the 1999 curriculum was published – a time before the world wide web! Today’s children are digital natives living in a world where they have ready access to information. The education system and children themselves are also shaped by different experiences of family life, different cultures, different beliefs and viewpoints, different abilities and needs. Consequently, schools and teachers face a growing challenge to recognise and respond to this diversity in a way that enables all children to learn and make progress.

Just consider that children born in 2019 and who begin primary school in September 2023/2024, will begin their working lives in the fifth decade of this century and retire in the late 2080s/early 2090s. This raises an all-important question about the type of primary curriculum we choose to develop for children now and for the years ahead.



The review journey so far....

Looking at curriculum priorities

In 2011, we invited people to share their priorities for primary education. Six top priorities were identified. Collectively, these showed some early signs of shifting curriculum priorities with an increased emphasis on wellbeing and on the importance of children feeling a sense of belonging and connection to their school community.

Six top priorities

1. Life skills through a broad curriculum	2. Communication	3. Wellbeing
4. Literacy and numeracy	5. Motivation and engagement	6. Identity and belonging

You can read about the key priorities in the *Priorities for Primary Education: Report on responses to ‘Have Your Say’* at ncca.ie/primary.



Reviewing and redeveloping the Primary Curriculum

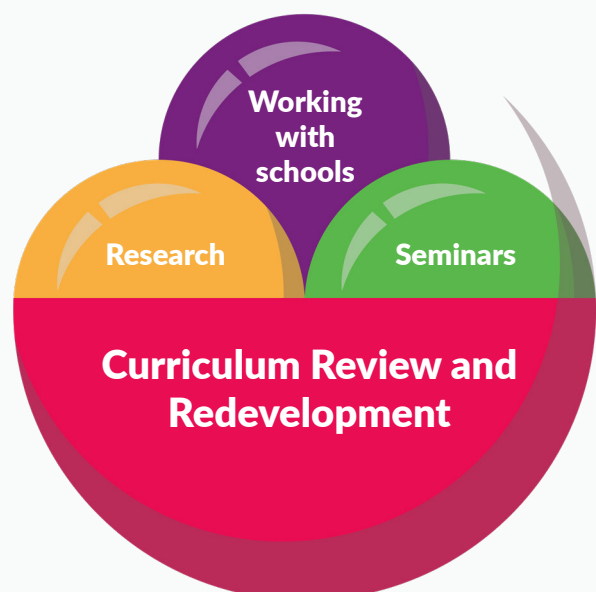
Phase 1, 2016/2017

Building on the curriculum priorities identified in 2011, the NCCA published two sets of proposals in December 2016 about how the primary school curriculum might be structured differently and how time might be used across the curriculum. This was the first time, in almost twenty years, that those working in primary education had the opportunity to consider the structure of the curriculum, what it should comprise and how time should be allocated within it. We used these proposals to consult widely with schools and stakeholders. You can read the consultation report and its executive summary at ncca.ie/primary on the 'Primary Developments' page.

Other curriculum consultations provide relevant information for reviewing and redeveloping the primary curriculum. These include proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, work on the new Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile, the draft Primary Mathematics Curriculum, and the ongoing review of Relationships and Sexuality Education.

Phase 2, 2018/2019

In the current phase of work, we are developing a draft curriculum framework that sets out the rationale for the redevelopment of the primary curriculum and the direction for future work in this area. There are three strands to this work, and each of these is shaped and influenced by the experiences of teachers, school leaders, parents and children, by research and by stakeholder perspectives. The strands are explained below.





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Research papers



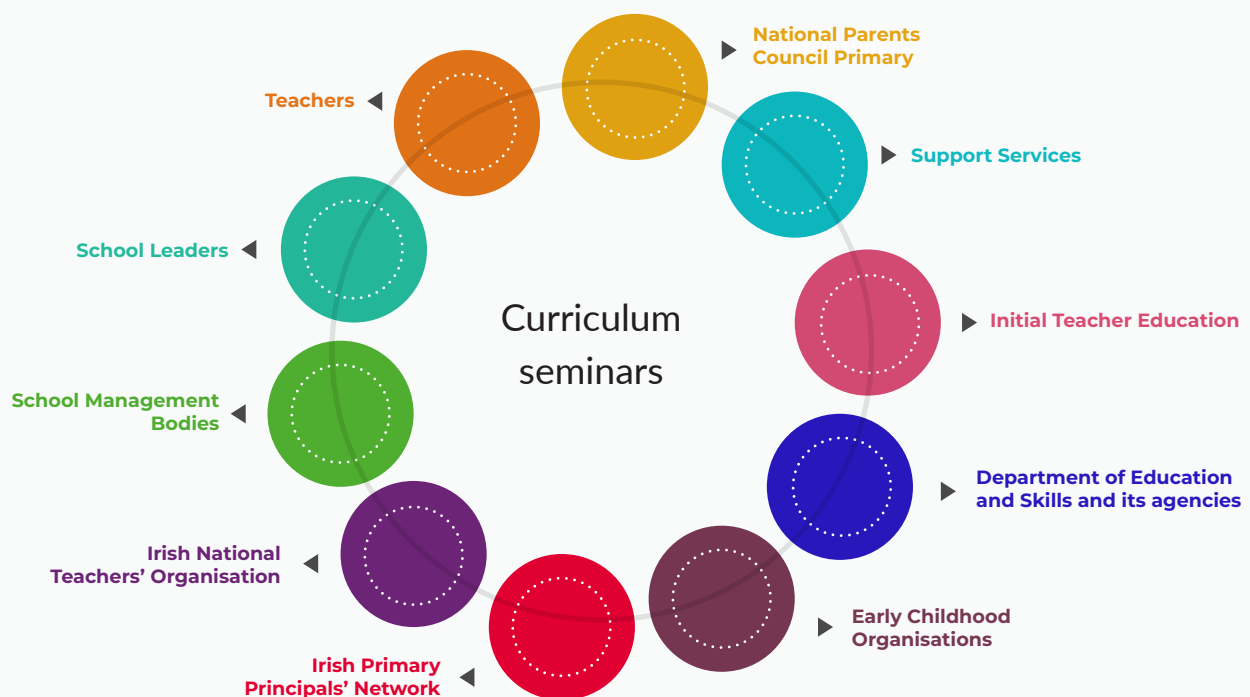
The NCCA's work draws heavily on research. We are collaborating with national and international researchers to develop a series of short papers on key aspects of a curriculum. The papers cover a range of topics including a critique of the 1999 curriculum, values and priorities for education, key competencies, integration, and assessment. They also include an audit of curriculum developments in other jurisdictions. You can find the full series of research papers on the 'Primary Developments' page at ncca.ie/primary.





Curriculum seminars

Between March 2018 and January 2019, we held five curriculum seminars. The seminars brought teachers, school leaders, and a wide range of stakeholders together, giving them opportunities to consider the key points emerging from the research papers, and to discuss and tease these out from their perspectives.



Schools Forum

The Forum consists of 44 primary schools, post-primary schools and preschools from across the country. Together, these represent the rich diversity of school contexts in Ireland. Teachers and practitioners meet every 4-6 weeks as a 'Schools Forum' to guide and help shape the review and redevelopment of the curriculum. Parents have also been sharing their hopes and ideas about a primary curriculum. In the words of one teacher, the Schools Forum provides a space where, *Parents and teachers have an opportunity to ponder big questions such as what we value in education, what its purpose is, how and what children should be taught, what's important in our current context and what the future might demand.*



What we are hearing so far

The strengths and successes of the 1999 primary curriculum has been a constant theme in our work with schools and stakeholders. So too though have the challenges and the gaps that are now being remarked upon in a 20-year old curriculum. In considering how the next iteration of the curriculum can build on the strengths of its predecessors whilst responding to the challenges experienced, a number of directions are emerging. Here is what consultation participants have told us is important in a redeveloped primary curriculum.

Purpose and priorities

- Outline clear aims, principles and priorities for children's learning across the eight years of a primary education.
- Support educational transitions by building on what and how children learn in preschool, and by connecting with what and how they will learn on moving to post-primary school.
- Consolidate recent and varied initiatives, programmes and strategies associated with the curriculum in order to help clarify priorities for primary education.

Structure and time

- Move from subjects to a more integrated curriculum for the early years of primary but ensure that the integrated structure provides strong foundations for subjects.
- Continue to use subjects to structure the curriculum in the later years of primary school, but give careful consideration to when (at what class level) this begins.
- Retain weekly time allocations for language and maths (and possibly PE) but look at time allocations for the rest of the curriculum on a longer timescale, such as monthly or termly basis.



- Provide greater flexibility for schools to decide how to use time across the curriculum in a way that best suits their school communities and at the same time ensures that children continue to enjoy a broad and balanced curriculum.
- Reinstate the idea of discretionary time and provide guidelines to assist schools in using this for a variety of purposes including local curriculum development.
- Include new and expanded areas of learning such as ERB and ethics, coding and computational thinking, modern foreign languages, and wellbeing.



Teaching and learning

- Respond to curriculum overload by eliminating unnecessary repetition, by reducing content and by providing practical advice on integration.
- Provide practical examples of new and innovative approaches to teaching and learning including using the outdoor environment.
- Emphasise the importance of developing dispositions and competencies as well as knowledge in order to support children to live in a rapidly changing world.
- Support schools' work in helping each child to make progress in their learning.
- Give greater opportunities for children to be involved in decision-making about their learning including through play, inquiry- and project-based learning.
- Re-envision assessment as an organic and dynamic part of teaching and learning serving the needs of children and teachers first and foremost.
- Strengthen relationships with parents and the communities in which schools work.



What we are hearing so far

Supporting and enabling curriculum change

Discussions have also focused on important supports needed to enable schools to work with a redeveloped primary curriculum. These include:

- time to become familiar with the new ideas and changes in the curriculum, and time to work with colleagues to plan for curriculum implementation at school level.
- ongoing access to, and opportunities for, high-quality and school-based continuing professional development.
- enabling and supporting teachers and school leaders to identify and prioritise school-based CPD needs alongside national priorities.
- reviewing and, where necessary, updating demands made of schools regarding curriculum planning and documentation.
- embedding the curriculum changes in initial teacher education.





Next steps



In the coming months, the NCCA will work with the Schools Forum and with the education partners to develop a draft curriculum framework. This framework will set out a vision for primary education providing a clear description of the purpose, structure and content of the redeveloped curriculum. The draft framework will be published later in the year for an extensive consultation.

This consultation is an opportunity for you to have your say and to get involved in the redevelopment of the primary curriculum. Details of how you do this will be on ncca.ie/primary and on social media, and all the necessary information will be shared with stakeholders including School Management Bodies, the INTO, the IPPN and the National Parents Council Primary.

Until then, you can learn more about the work on the primary curriculum on the 'Primary Developments' pages at ncca.ie/primary. You can also sign up here to receive email updates.

