

Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

Written submission template for organisations, groups and individuals responding to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*

This template is intended to support you (and your colleagues/organisation) in developing a written submission in response to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. Please e-mail your completed submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Individual submission details

Name	
Date	
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Organisation submission details

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Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Date	30/12/2020
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Yes

No

Please provide some brief background information on your organisation (if applicable).

The remainder of the template includes two sections. Section 1 invites your overall comments and observations on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. Section 2 is structured to align with the six key messages related to the framework. Each message is summarised as a support for you in working on the submission.

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Section 1

Please outline your overall response to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*.

We welcome the publication of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (2020) and the opportunity to provide feedback on the Framework. We note the importance placed on the agentic teacher in this document and the commitment to the flourishing of all children in realising their full potential. We commend this concept as a positive reinforcement of the holistic development of the child, ensuring that each child receives a rounded education enabling them to be active citizens in the society of today and tomorrow.

The NCCA should be commended for acknowledging the contribution of religion to the child's overall education and attempting to address the needs of all children in developing Education about Religion and Beliefs and Ethics and continuing Religious Education under the heading of the Patron's programme. We share a number of serious concerns, however, about the fragmented and misunderstood approach to Religious Education in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. We address these concerns under the following headings throughout Section 2:

- Wellbeing
- A holistic understanding of education?
- Fragmentation of Religious Education
- Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics
- Inconsistency between the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* and *Aistear* and *Framework for Junior Cycle*

In summary, the NCCA had an opportunity to do something really creative in this curriculum in Ireland. To move beyond old binaries and to generate a more inclusive, interculturally and inter-religiously rich and faith-formationally-friendly understanding of Religious Education (RE) that included a variety of approaches (learning in, for and about religion and beliefs). This *Framework* is a missed opportunity. Now is the time for the state to enlarge its understanding of RE and to appreciate the curricular value of RE with its powerful contribution to children's learning and their spiritual, moral, religious and belief education and wellbeing. Instead the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* perpetuates a divisive splintered approach. International research lends itself to the adoption of inclusive understandings of RE with a multiplicity of approaches appropriate for a

diverse range of school types that would address the needs of children in 21st century Ireland. The NCCA still has time to provide a research-based rationale for including RE within the curriculum and to change the current splintered framework.

Not only has this draft framework continued the centuries-old binary practice of partitioning what it now calls the 'Patron's Programme' (thereby avoiding mentioning RE as a curricular area and operating in a manner that is out of synch with other jurisdictions around the globe) from what has been perceived as the 'secular' subjects in its 5 + 1 approach (the 5 curricular areas plus the Patron's one) it also splinters the Patron's Programme into a constellation of titles and approaches that have no educational rationale or coherence.

In 2020 this NCCA document proposes to effectively fragment the curriculum into 'secular' curricular area and Patron's Programme while simultaneously further fragmenting the discipline of RE into a 'Patron's Programme' and ERB and Ethics. This practice of segregation and separation is educationally unsustainable. ERB and Ethics is a type of religious education and belongs within the curricular area of RE which houses a plurality of approaches to teaching in, for and about religious and beliefs and values. Where it is mentioned in the curriculum, the Patron's Programme is no longer a curricular area so much as a pragmatic splintered compendium of names for an activity that fills a particular 2-hour weekly time allocation in the curricular framework. This dislocation of RE from the 5 curricular areas goes against the entire principles and the approach of the framework highlighted by this document e.g. Whole school planning, holistic education, home-school-community interconnection etc.

Furthermore, the relationship between ERB and Ethics and the Patron's Programme is confusing. The title adopted by the NCCA 'Religious/ Ethical/ Multi-belief Education – Patron's Programme' p. 11' is not a title or any curricular subject so much as a descriptive smorgasboard of options with little coherence and no educational rationale (one might suggest more of a pragmatic rationale) for its inclusion in the curriculum. No research has been cited for the exclusion of RE from the 5 curricular areas.

RE could sit comfortably within the vision and principles of the curriculum. The document on p.14 provides a very short thumbnail description of the different Patron's Programmes in Ireland. This is not a curricular area and the lack of coherence impoverishes the curriculum. This framework document replicates historical and legal distinctions, creates a binary landscape and splinters what

was called RI in the 1971 curriculum and RE in the 1999 curriculum so that not only is the coherence of RE called into question, the very coherence of the curricular framework is questionable.

Section 2

Agency and flexibility in schools

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Be for every child.
- Recognise teachers' and principals' agency and professionalism to enact the curriculum in their individual school context.
- Give more flexibility to schools in terms of planning and timetabling to identify and respond to priorities and opportunities.
- Connect with different school contexts in the education system.
- Give greater opportunities for flexibility and choice for children's learning.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to agency and flexibility in schools. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Curriculum connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Provide a clear vision for children's learning across the eight years of primary school.
- Link with learning experiences provided through the themes of the *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and connect with the subjects, key skills and statements of learning in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.
- Support educational transitions by connecting with what and how children learn at home, in preschool and post-primary school.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to curriculum connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Emerging priorities for children's learning

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

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- Embed seven key competencies across children’s learning outcomes from junior infants to sixth class.
- Focus on developing children’s skills, knowledge, dispositions, values and attitudes. The Learning Outcomes and the Key Competencies are broad in nature to describe this wider understanding of learning.
- Have increased emphasis on some existing areas such as PE and SPHE (Wellbeing) and digital learning, and have new aspects such as Modern Foreign Languages, Technology, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, and a broader Arts Education.

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework outlines important messages in relation to emerging priorities for children’s learning. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Wellbeing

The inclusion and fore fronting of Wellbeing demonstrates the continuity between the early years, primary and the post-primary educational journey of the child. It is concerning, however, to see that ‘Wellbeing’ is only confined to Physical and Health Education, along with Social, Personal and Values Education. Surely, all subject areas contribute to the overall wellbeing of children? To name a subject area as Wellbeing is to diminish and reduce the meaning of the word and to reduce the purpose of all the other subjects offered on the curriculum. For instance, there is a growing body of research pointing to a direct correlation between belonging to a religious tradition and wellbeing:

- Koenig, H., King, D. & Caron, V.B. (2012) *Handbook of Religion and Health, Second Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- O’Brien, M., (2008) *Well-Being and Post Primary Schooling, A Review of the Literature and Research*, Dublin: NCCA.
- PEW Research Centre (2019) *Religion’s Relationship to Happiness, Civic Engagement and Health Around the World*. <http://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2019/01/Wellbeing-report-1-25-19-FULL-REPORT-FOR-WEB.pdf>
- Spencer, N., Madden, G, Purtill & Ewing, J. (2016). *Religion and Well-being: Assessing the Evidence*, London: Theos. see: <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Reports/Religion%20and%20well-being%20%20combined.pdf>
- Ying, C. & VanderWeele, T.J. (2018). ‘Associations of Religious Upbringing With Subsequent Health and Well-Being, From Adolescence to Young Adulthood: An Outcome-Wide Analysis’ in *American Journal of Epidemiology*, Vol 187, No 11, pp.2355-2364. See: <https://academic.oup.com/aje/article/187/11/2355/5094534>

A holistic understanding of education?

There is a shift in the anthropology of the child in the new curriculum. In the 1999 curriculum, the holistic nature of the child took into consideration the spiritual, moral and religious identity. This language is much reduced in the new curriculum. It stated that 'For most people in Ireland, the totality of the human condition cannot be understood or explained merely in terms of physical and social experience' (NCCA 1999, p.27). Looking at the figures from the latest CSO survey, it is difficult to see how that statement has changed. The vast majority of people in Ireland belong to a religious tradition (87.37%), with only 0.1% identifying as atheist. While there is a growing number of people who do not consider themselves religious (9.64%), the vast majority of that group consider themselves spiritual (RTE Behaviour and Attitudes Exit Poll 2016). That is why the removal of much of the vocabulary that refers to 'spiritual', 'religious' and 'moral' does not seem to correspond to the data.

The following table looks at the different use of these words between both curricula:

1999 Curriculum	Words	Proposed Curriculum
14 times	Spiritual	4 times
10 times	Moral	1 time
2 times	Ethics	9 times
26 times	Religious	9 times

While these are broad strokes, it does indicate a change in the understanding of the child but does not seem to reflect the data from the census. It is true that much has changed in Ireland over the past 30 years but it is a question of balance and proportion.

It is unfortunate that these sorts of issues concerning the anthropology of the child at work in the curriculum and the place of Religious Education/Patron's Programme never featured as part of the seminars informing the structure and content for the next curriculum. As such, it is welcome to see the statement which reads 'whether or not there should be a more extended statement within the redeveloped curriculum about the religious, spiritual and ethical domain' (2020, p.3). At least there now appears some openness to think through these sorts of matters, which is very welcome.

Recommendation:

We strongly recommend an expanded statement and development of the vision/purpose of education in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. While the holistic development of the child is evident in the *Aistear Framework* and indeed the *Framework for the Junior Cycle*, there appears

to be minimum (reluctant/reticent?) referral to this element of the child's education, through the various and fragmented forms of Religious Education, in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. This is unusual given the clearer statements around this area in the *Aistear* and *Junior Cycle Framework*.

Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Be broad and balanced in purpose and content.
- Be structured in five broad curriculum areas;
 - Language
 - Mathematics, Science and Technology Education
 - Wellbeing
 - Social and Environmental Education
 - Arts Education.

(In addition to the five areas above, the Patron's Programme is developed by a school's patron with the aim of contributing to the child's holistic development particularly from the religious and/or ethical perspective and in the process, underpins and supports the characteristic spirit of the school. These areas connect to the themes of *Aistear* and to the subject-based work in Junior Cycle.)

- Provide for an integrated learning experience, with curriculum areas in Stages 1 and 2 (junior Infants – second Class) and more subject-based learning in Stages 3 and 4 (third class – sixth class).
- Use broad learning outcomes to describe the expected learning and development for children.
- Incorporate the new *Primary Language Curriculum / Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to changing how the curriculum is structured and presented. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Fragmentation of Religious Education: A Missed Opportunity

The lack of acknowledgement of the Religious Education (RE) of the child is of serious concern in a curriculum that forefronts the flourishing of the child and their wellbeing. While the *Draft Primary*

Curriculum Framework does not provide a rationale for the inclusion or exclusion of RE a curricular area, what it has done in the draft curriculum is fragment the academic discipline into that of Education about Religions, Beliefs and Ethics, and Patron's Programme. The Patron's Programmes in Ireland are forms of Religious Education curricula when you look at them under the *Toledo guiding principles on the teaching about religious education and beliefs in public schools* (ODIHR/OSCE 2007).

Missed Opportunity

The NCCA had an opportunity to do something really creative in this curriculum in Ireland. To move beyond old binaries and to generate a more inclusive, interculturally and inter-religiously rich and faith-formationally-friendly understanding of RE that included a variety of approaches (learning in, for and about religion and beliefs). This Framework is a missed opportunity. Now is the time for the State to enlarge its understanding of RE and to appreciate the curricular value of RE with its powerful contribution to children's learning and their spiritual, moral, religious and belief education and wellbeing. Instead this Framework perpetuates a divisive, splintered approach. International research lends itself to the adoption of inclusive understandings of RE with a multiplicity of approaches appropriate for a diverse range of school types that would address the needs of children in 21st century Ireland. The NCCA still has time to provide a research-based rationale for including RE within the curriculum and to change the current splintered framework.

Not only has this Draft Framework continued the centuries-old binary practice of partitioning what it now calls the 'Patron's Programme' (thereby avoiding mentioning RE as a curricular area and operating in a manner that is out of synch with other jurisdictions around the globe) from what has been perceived as the 'secular' subjects in its 5 + 1 approach (the 5 curricular areas plus the Patron's one) it also splinters the Patron's Programme into a constellation of titles and approaches that have no educational rationale or coherence.

Recommendation:

The NCCA need to reconsider and reengage with a broader understanding of Religious Education at primary level rather than fragmenting the academic discipline as proposed in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*.

Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

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- Promote high quality teaching, learning and assessment.
- Conceptualise assessment as an essential and critical part of teaching and learning.
- Highlight the importance of teachers' professional judgement in supporting progression in children's learning.
- Encourage teachers to make meaningful connections with children's interests and experiences.
- Recognise the significance of quality relationships and their impact on children's learning.
- Recognise the role and influence of parents and families in children's education.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Rights of the Child

The United Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UN,1989) has four articles that refer to the religious rights of children and four separate ones that deal with the spiritual lives of children. We must ensure that the rights of the child are respected and addressed within the curriculum in these areas.

The key questions addressed on p. 2 'What is the purpose of a primary education for tomorrow's children? What priorities, structure and components within a curriculum can support this?' have not addressed children's right and need to understand, experience and learn about and from the rich and diverse religious and belief dimensions of life in any coherent, sustained, holistic, integrated, educational manner. There is no rationale for the removal of all reference to RE as a curricular area. Instead, a pragmatic and partitionist decision is made to compartmentalise 'The Patron's Programme' from the 5 curricular areas and to allocate 2 hours per week to this Patron's Programme (p.16-18).

Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics

While it is good to see that one form of Religious Education, *Education about Religion and Beliefs and Ethics*, is deemed to be an emerging priority for children's learning, for the purpose of clarity, there should be further expansion on the relationship between this proposed area and current approaches to Religious Education. There is a lack of detail in the document re this proposed new

learning area and where it sits on the curriculum and a key issue remains as to what is the best way to progress the proposed pathways in Religious Education in both a meaningful and operable way, for the child and for schools. Is there a better way of integrating Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics into the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*? The 2016 consultation process around Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics highlighted some of the practical and philosophical considerations around the introduction of an additional subject area in Religion, indicating a number of contextual issues including: ‘the rights of the patron bodies as set out in the Education Act 1998; questions about the impact of the proposal on the ethos of the 96 per cent of schools still under denominational patronage; the suggestion that much of what has been proposed by the new curriculum is happening in schools already; and the repeated voiced concern about time pressure and curriculum overload and the challenges associated with such.’ (Byrne, 2018 p. 40)

It is unclear how the Framework addresses any of these issues, rather it raises a number of further questions and complexities about the relationship between this proposed area of learning and existing RE/Patron’s programmes.

Questions

- Since there are already Religious Education programmes in the vast majority of primary schools in the state (95%) why is another one being introduced?
- Why does the state believe it is a good idea to introduce ERB and Ethics and have two religious education programmes run parallel to one another?
- Why does the state not recognise and build upon the existing ERB and Ethical aspects of the denominational RE programmes in primary schools in Ireland instead of introducing another programme?
- While there is clearly a need for some sort of ERB and Ethics for children withdrawn from Religious Education but why this should be extended to every child is unclear. How will ERB and Ethics be in keeping with the characteristic spirit of the different schools?
- Why is the term Religious Education effectively removed from the proposed Primary Curriculum (categorised under the heading Patron’s Programme) to emerge at Junior Cycle again?
- It is interesting that the competency *Fostering Wellbeing* (p.8) mentions the child’s spiritual development. The subject area *Wellbeing* makes no reference to spirituality (p.13-14). If ERB and Ethics is to be placed in Wellbeing should it not refer to spirituality?

Recommendation:

For connection and consistency, the document should include a section on the purpose of education, acknowledging a commitment to holistic education, and expand on the contribution of Religious Education to the overall development of the child in the context of this vision. Furthermore, an expanded section on the place of Religious Education would be helpful. This statement would acknowledge the different approaches and understandings that exist in relation to Religious Education, or at the very least refer to them, and how the proposed area of Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics contributes or can be integrated with the curricular area of Religious Education.

Building on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to the challenges and changing needs and priorities.

The 1999 curriculum contributed to many successes including:

- Enhanced enjoyment of learning for children.
- Increased use of active methodologies for teaching and learning.
- Improved attainment levels in reading, mathematics and science as evidenced in national and international assessments.

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Address curriculum overload at primary level.
- Take stock of strategies, initiatives and programmes and clarify priorities for children's learning.
- Link with *Aistear* and *the Framework for Junior Cycle*.

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework outlines important messages in relation to building on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to challenges and changing needs and priorities. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Inconsistency between the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* and *Aistear* and *Framework for Junior Cycle*

There appears to be an inconsistency between the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* and *Aistear* and *Framework for the Junior Cycle*, notably in the acknowledgement of the spiritual development of the child and the place of Religious Education.

The *Aistear Framework* clearly references the spiritual dimension as integral to young children's learning and development. (NCCA 2009, pp.10,17)

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* clearly acknowledges the contribution of Religious Education and clearly outlines its place in a broader philosophy of education. Citing the 1996 UNESCO Report, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, it proposes that education throughout life is based on four pillars: Learning to know (acquiring the instruments of understanding), Learning to Do (to be able to act creatively on one's environment), Learning to Live Together (so as to participate and co-operate with other people in all human activities) and Learning to Be (with the aim of the development and fulfilment of the person). (Delors, 1996) These aims are summarised in the conviction that:

Education should contribute to every person's complete development – mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality. The aim of this development is the complete fulfilment of the human person, in all the richness of his or her personality, the complexity of his or her forms of expression and his or her various commitments – as individual, member of a family and of a community, citizen and a producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer.

In this broader educational understanding, Religious Education offers a unique learning site that contributes to the holistic development of the child. This learning is described as a 'space like no other.'

'RE offers a space like no other: for encounter, explanation, and empathy; for expression, interpretation, and imagination; for interrogation, questioning, and reflection...It gives an opportunity for students to experience and to bring into dialogue with one another both insider and outsider perspectives with regard to religious issues. It prompts pupils to think about similarities and differences between people and, in so doing, to reflect upon their own uniqueness and forms of belonging.' (Sullivan, 2017 p.7)

It appears that the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* focuses on competencies, principles, structures and time allocations, all welcome and necessary developments. It could be argued, however, that it is somewhat reductionist in its underlying philosophy, or at least needs to expand the vision. This would provide greater clarity re the understanding of ERB and Ethics and the curricular area of Religious Education.

The removal of 'Religious Education' as a curricular area diminishes the continuum between *Aistear* and the *Framework for the Junior Cycle*. We recommend that the NCCA address the splintered approach to Religious Education in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* and explore a renewed, critical understanding of the curricular area of RE.

It must be acknowledged that in the Irish context, Religious Education at primary level is only emerging on an inevitable journey of evolution. It would be helpful to chart the development of Religious Education in other countries where there is an ongoing dialogue and debate about the contested purposes of this subject area, for example, a recent report *Religious Literacy: A way forward for Religious Education?* (Biesta, Aldrige, Hannam & Whittle, 2019) illustrates the myriad of complexities that exist when unravelling the implications of different positions and understandings in relation to the nature and purpose of education, religion and Religious Education. There is an urgent need for further reflection on these issues prior to creating a situation in the Irish context that loads primary-level Religious Education with too many competing imperatives, leading to curriculum overload and confusion for the teacher.

References:

- Biesta, G., Aldrige, D., Hannam, P., & Whittle, S. (2019) *Religious Literacy: A way forward for Religious Education?* Oxford: Culham St Gabriel's Trust.
- Byrne, G. (2018). Religious Education in Ireland Today. In Whittle, S. (ed.) (2018) *Religious Education in Catholic Schools: Perspectives from Ireland and the UK*. pp. 33-50. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Delors, J. (1996) *Learning: The Treasure Within: Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- Moran, G. (1984) *Religious education as second language*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2020). *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)/ Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (2007) Toledo guiding principles on the teaching about religious education and beliefs in public schools. Available from: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154?download=true> (Accessed 20 August 2020).
- Sullivan, J. (2017). A Space like no other. In Shanahan, M. (ed.) (2017). *Does Religious Education Matter?* pp. 7-24.

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Thank you for your submission.

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