

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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Date	22 nd December 2020
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Yes

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Yes X No

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

Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), are the management body for Catholic primary schools in Ireland and this submission seeks to represent the perspective of those tasked with the governance of Catholic primary schools. As a management body which provides training and advice on a wide range of areas to over 2800 schools, we are in a unique position of being able to understand and react to the needs of a large number of primary schools.

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.

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Section 1

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

Irish society has undergone an exceptionally dramatic period of change in recent decades. The educational landscape has witnessed change and development during this time also. Education is seen as having a central role in economic, social and cultural development in Ireland. The high level of public interest has resulted in successive governments recognising, and acting on, the role of education in national planning strategies. The Education Act, Section 9(d) is very clear where it outlines the responsibility of a school in providing education which should be appropriate to the abilities and needs of its pupils and should 'promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school'. Catholic schools have a rich tradition in the field of education. They are places that aspire to excellence in teaching and learning while also remaining inclusive and welcoming of all. Recent years have witnessed initiatives in areas of literacy and numeracy all competing for space in an already overcrowded curriculum thus compounding demands on primary schools to deliver more. However, in an effort to include everything on the current political agenda does the curriculum framework run the risk of neglecting that which underpins our success as nurturing spaces for children to grow and reach their full potential? In our rush to appease current cultural and social debate are we failing to give due regard to the historical evolution of education in Ireland. Is the end goal the creation of state schools who almost entirely ignore the legal right of the patron to faith based schools, to nurture the characteristic spirit of the school?

The *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction* (DES, 1999) offers the following rationale for the inclusion of religious education in the curriculum for all children: 'The spiritual dimension is a fundamental aspect of individual experience, and its religious and cultural expression is an inextricable part of Irish culture and history. Religious education specifically enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God'. (DES, 1999, p. 58)

The Education Act, 1998, section 30 (2)(d) requires the Minister to ensure that a 'reasonable amount' of time is set aside in each school day for 'subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school'. The recommendation by the NCCA in the development of the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) specified a half hour each day as being 'reasonable' for the teaching of patron programmes. What has changed since then? NCCA have proposed a reduction in time allocated without any rationale as to why this was necessary. It is difficult to see the NCCA's proposals to shorten the time allocation for religious education as anything other than an attempt to undermine the Patron's religious education programme and role in a school and to reduce a schools 'characteristic spirit' to a less meaningful endeavour. In curriculum reform in the past at post primary level, weight is given to the role and place of characteristic spirit, where schools are told to plan for their Junior cycle programmes with the characteristic spirit of the school in mind. This document fails to capture the central role of the characteristic spirit of the school.

CPSMA are concerned that this document does nothing to acknowledge the role of the Board of Management with regard to curriculum provision in the school. The board manages the school on behalf of the patron and is accountable to the patron and the minister of education. As part of their core function the Education Act 1998 places a statutory duty on the board to ensure that an appropriate education is provided to all of the schools pupils. The functions of the Board are set out in section 15 of the Education Act, 1998.

Section 15 of the Education Act, 1998 states:

- (1) It shall be the duty of the board to manage the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the students and their parents and to provide or cause to be provided an appropriate education for each student at the school for which that board has responsibility.
- (2) A board shall perform the functions conferred on it and on a school by this Act and in carrying out its function the board shall-
 - (a) do so in accordance with the policies determined by the Minister from time to time,
 - (b) uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school, and at all times act in accordance with any Act of the Oireachtas or instrument made there under, deed, charter, articles of management or other such instrument relating to the establishment or operation of the school.

The Board of Management have a central role in curriculum provision in primary schools and as such NCCA fail to acknowledge this in any way in their document.

Currently the development and oversight of religious education programmes in primary schools are the remit of the different patron bodies. The Department of Education and Science in the 1999 Primary School Curriculum: 'recognises the rights of the different church authorities to design curricula in religious education at primary level and to supervise their teaching and implementation.' (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 58) Indeed the *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction* (DES, 1999) sets out a definite rationale for the inclusion of RE in the primary curriculum and there is a clear presentation of the importance and central role of ethos as the means by which Catholic schools define their purpose, their way of operating and how they foster and enrich their relationships. The objectives listed in the introduction of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum see the assisting of children to 'develop the capacity to make ethical judgements informed by the tradition and ethos of the school'. In contrast this understanding is absent from the current NCCA draft material. What would this mean for Catholic schools in the future? In an article written for the Irish Times in 2014, Dr Gareth Byrne articulates his view on the important role played by religious education in schools and indicates the negative repercussion associated with any denigration of its place in education:

'RE in schools contributes not only to the personal reflection and development of young people but should also heighten respect for the beliefs of the other and help build a diverse but cohesive society. To neglect Religious Education is to neglect the future.' (Byrne, 2014)

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.

CPSMA acknowledge the importance of agency and flexibility in schools but such agency and flexibility needs to reflect the characteristic spirit of the school. The Ethos of the school is the lens through which schools engage with current curriculum and would also see school engagement with any future curriculum framework. The Primary School Curriculum (1999) was founded on the principle of integrated learning and teachers were encouraged to detect valuable connections between spiritual, moral and religious education and all the other curriculum areas. Such flexibility is central to teacher agency and the success of schools in the future.

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.

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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.

CPSMA welcomes the development of curriculum connections between preschool, primary and secondary.

We envisage that the curriculum would build on content that will be introduced in an age and stage appropriate way. Thus affording children experiences that are connected to their lives both in school and at home in a meaningful way.

The importance of dialogue and collaboration between professionals, both teachers and outside agencies and parents can only serve to improve the educational experience of the child while also affording parents, the primary educators, opportunities to see the benefits of such connections. Educational transitions are pivotal moments in the child's educational journey and as such need to be attended to in a structured and consistent manner over all levels.

Emerging priorities for children's learning

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

- 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.

CPSMA note the introduction of the acronym SPVE on page 11 of the draft document which stands for Social, Personal, Values Education. The introduction of the term values here without a detailed unpacking of the intention behind the use of the term is problematic. Whose values are being promoted and taught? Who gets to decide this fundamental area of learning for the pupils in the school?

With regard to the inclusion of ERB and Ethics as an emerging priority for schools, ERB and Ethics is being provided for by the Patron's programmes as they afford every pupil an opportunity to appreciate and understand the significance of religion for many people.

Catholic schools are places of diversity, a true reflection of the diversity of people in Irish society today. Religious Education in Catholic schools is student focused. Children are afforded opportunities for discussion of their personal experiences and are provided opportunities in their day to reflect on belonging and being cherished as part of an inclusive school community. Religious Education contributes to the religious, spiritual and moral development of the person. It has a central role in contributing to basic religious literacy about religions and beliefs while encouraging people to be sensitive to, know about and understand religion. This includes education around the religious dimension of life while also encouraging respect and tolerance for existing religious and non-religious convictions, traditions and worldviews. This provides the foundations for a diverse but cohesive society. Religious Education is valued by individuals and communities who understand this vital contribution.

In the priority area, Wellbeing, it is hoped that engagement with nature will be at its core. Walking in natural environments promotes wellbeing too, so it is hoped that the redeveloped curriculum will place a major emphasis on outdoor learning. Nature-friendly school grounds are necessary for promoting wellbeing and it is hoped that before the curriculum is launched that the Department of Education will prioritise these in new and existing schools. Investment in education is key to its success. Recent times have highlighted the gross underfunding of schools and going forward there needs to be an increased investment in primary education both in terms of infrastructure, personnel and opportunities for continuous professional development.

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.

CPSMA welcome a more integrated approach to teaching and learning, particularly in the early years of primary.

CPSMA believe that a curriculum frame work for primary schools in Ireland needs to uphold the status of the Patron’s programme in the religious, spiritual, ethical domain. In the draft document on page 11 we see a discrepancy between the diagram depicting 6 areas of the curriculum and the 5 broad curriculum areas listed above and throughout the draft document itself. This at the very least causes confusion and omits the sixth and equally significant curriculum area namely Religious, Spiritual ethical education. Religious Education in schools under Catholic patronage is determined by the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*. This curriculum, which was published in 2015, is the foundation upon which *Grow in Love* a programme developed for Catholic schools is based. The general aim of this Religious Education curriculum is ‘to help children mature in relation to their spiritual, moral and religious lives, through their encounter with, exploration and celebration of the Catholic faith’ (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2014, p. 22). Religious Education affords every child the opportunity to enrich their literacy and skills through a wide range of texts and resources through words, story, art and music, all of which help develop knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes for lifelong learning.

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:

- Promote high quality teaching, learning and assessment.
- Conceptualise assessment as an essential and critical part of teaching and learning.

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- 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.

Catholic schools have a rich tradition as places where high quality teaching, learning and assessment are central to the priorities of the school. Since the introduction of the 1999 curriculum schools have embraced new learning and pedagogical approaches. Catholic schools are places of innovation and resilience as evident throughout the recent school closures where schools adjusted to new ways of teaching and learning almost overnight. CPSMA is confident that going forward Catholic schools will continue to embrace new and innovative pedagogical approaches and strategies to teaching and learning with assessment at its core.

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.

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- 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.

The *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction* (DES, 1999) outlines the following rationale for the inclusion of Religious Education in the curriculum for all children: The spiritual dimension is a fundamental aspect of individual experience, and its religious and cultural expression is an inextricable part of Irish culture and history. Religious education specifically enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God. (DES, 1999, p. 58)

It is important to note that 87.3% of the Irish population belong to a religious denomination – and according to a RTE Behaviour and Attitudes Exit Poll in 2016, of the 14% who identified as not belonging to any religious tradition, 10% of them said they were spiritual. So, one can infer that over 90% of the population, at the very least, would say they are spiritual and we are developing a curriculum that does not appear to place any importance of this part of the identity of the Irish person.

As the management body for Catholic primary schools in Ireland, we take this opportunity to clearly restate our support for the on-going inclusion of the ‘religious and ethical’ component in the curriculum, while also insisting on the consistent inclusion of “spiritual” in this phrase. There needs to be a clear statement in any redeveloped framework to uphold the status of the patron’s programme in the “religious, spiritual and ethical domain.” We consider this to be central to the holistic development of any child in a Catholic ethos school.

Data Protection

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Thank you for your submission.

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