

# 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](mailto:PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie)

### *Individual submission details*

<b>Name</b>	
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<b>Date</b>	31 December 2020
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The NCCA will publish written submissions received during the consultation. The submissions will include the author's/contributor's name/organisation. Do you consent to this submission being posted online?

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Please email your submission to [PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie](mailto:PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie)

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

The Dublin Archdiocese Education Secretariat support the work of the 450 schools Boards of Management and this submission seeks to represent the perspective of those tasked with the governance in those schools.

The Boards of Management are appointed by the Archbishop and manage the schools on his behalf.

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](mailto:PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie)

# Section 1

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

The high level of public interest in Education 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.

In Dublin Archdiocese we have three appointed Diocesan advisers tasked with supporting the Boards of Management in promoting the Characteristic Spirit of a school under the Archbishop’s patronage. We have over 450 schools in the Diocese including 13 special schools that need particular support in emphasising the uniqueness and dignity of each child.

DES initiatives in areas of literacy and numeracy are all competing for space in an already overcrowded curriculum thus compounding demands on primary schools to deliver more.

However, in an effort to include current political demands 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? Is there due recognition of what has worked well in the past and the need to maintain same?

Is there a move to create de- facto state schools who almost entirely ignore the legal right of the patron of 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 30 minutes each day as being ‘reasonable’ for the teaching of Patron programmes. What has changed since then? Why is the Patron programme time reduced to 2 hours?

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. This document fails entirely to capture the central role of the characteristic spirit of the school. We must assert the need to maintain Religious education as a core subject in our Catholic schools.

The Education secretariat is 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 school's 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, the 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 religious education 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.

There appears to be a need to implement a 'one size' fits all curriculum. This overlooks the Core subject requirement of Religious Education in a Catholic school which legally such a school must uphold. In addition to the legal obligations outlined in statute, there are additional legal

obligations under Trust Law and charitable governance legislation concerning the Ethos in a school.

## 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.**

The Dublin Education Secretariat welcomes the opportunity for increased autonomy for schools by providing flexibility with regard to planning and timetabling of subjects, 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 the 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. This degree of flexibility has operated in our special schools and we look forward to introducing elements of same in our mainstream schools. However, we do need to assert the fundamental position of Religious Education as a core subject.

While the options for timetabling are detailed and comprehensive, the multiplicity of options at different stages of the primary school across three different options may prove overwhelming for schools to critically assess and implement, leading to confusion and frustration. Consideration should be given to streamlining the options and stages within options before the publication of the new curriculum.

We note curriculum enactment including greater recognition of teachers' professionalism and principals' capacity is highlighted but one must also be cognisant that such important stakeholders are employees of the Board of management that need Training, Management and Guidance with clear direction from the Boards as regards the standards required in a school. This complex legal area of employer and employee responsibility and duties receives no consideration in the report and needs resources and attention to be implemented correctly.

### **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.**
- The Dublin Education secretariat welcomes the development of curriculum connections between preschool, primary and secondary school, which has the potential to offer increased continuity of educational experience for each. We wish to highlight the need to include parents of special education needs children in the drafting and approval of education plans at an early stage as is evident in other European countries especially Spain.
- We envisage that the curriculum would build on content that will be introduced in an age and stage appropriate way. This would afford children experiences that are connected to their lives both in school and at home in a meaningful way.

The importance of the Home school Liason person needs to be supported and developed. 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.**

The Dublin Education secretariat notes 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? What happens where Values conflict with Ethos?

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. Wellbeing does not always include the spiritual wellbeing of a child. Wellbeing in a Catholic school should reflect the founding purpose of the school. Wellbeing needs to balance personal development consistent with the realisation that one is a member of society that promotes the Common Good as outlined in the Beatitudes.

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.**

The Dublin Education Secretariat welcome a more integrated approach to teaching and learning, particularly in the early years of primary with an increased opportunity for a thematic approach to curricular integration.

We assert 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 2014, 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.

We confirm that an opportunity exists for climate action to be integrated across all areas of the new proposed curriculum, as opposed to being included in one or two curricular subjects, to ensure deep learning and understanding of the area. The breadth of the scope of the issue presents opportunities to consider climate change from economic, social, physical, and cultural perspectives.

### **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.
- 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. Catholic schools in our

diocese will continue to embrace new and innovative pedagogical approaches and strategies to teaching and learning with assessment at its core.

Planning will be a huge central element of the implementation of the new curriculum, both at school and individual teacher level. Schools will be required to absorb a huge amount of information, make decisions and implement them across a whole curriculum in a short space of time. As part of curriculum implementation, the NCCA should provide planning exemplars for teachers to support curricular planning and assessment to assist schools in this regard. We assert that assistance will be needed for the teachers in our 13 special schools.

Due to the range of curricular options, opportunities for curricular integration and multiplicity of pedagogical approaches envisaged in the new curriculum, the NCCA should monitor closely the potential effect on the new curriculum on the potential dilution of individual subject matter and knowledge.

One pedagogical approach which could benefit by the introduction of the new curriculum is outdoor education. Special schools in our Diocese have already provided good models in the Outdoor education area. Outdoor education is an environment focussed approach to teaching and learning, underpinned by active and thematic learning methods (Dahlgren and Szczepanski 1998). It has the potential to provide opportunities for real learning by developing additional knowledge and skills, while also improving pupil wellbeing, physical exercise, social interaction and environmental connectedness (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010).

### **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*.

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**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)

As the Patron's secretariat dealing with over 450 Catholic primary schools in Dublin Archdiocese, 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**

The NCCA fully respects your right to privacy. Any personal information which you volunteer to the NCCA will be treated with the highest standards of security and confidentiality, strictly in accordance with the Data Protection Acts. If you require further information related to data protection please visit [www.ncca.ie/en/privacy-statement](http://www.ncca.ie/en/privacy-statement) or you can contact the NCCA's Data Protection Officer at [dpo@ncca.ie](mailto:dpo@ncca.ie).

**Thank you for your submission.**

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