

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	
E-mail	

Organisation submission details

Name	Orla McGowan
Position	Programme Manager for Education, Health and Wellbeing
Organisation	Health Service Executive
Date	27 th January
E-mail	

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?

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Yes

No

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

The Health and Wellbeing Division of the HSE is focused on helping people to stay healthy and well, reducing health inequalities and protecting people from threats to their health and wellbeing. It was established based on two fundamental policy shifts within the health service – [Future Health](#), which describes the new structures currently being established for the healthcare system, and [Healthy Ireland](#), the Government Framework to improve the health and wellbeing of our population.

The services within Health and Wellbeing support people and communities to protect and improve their health and wellbeing; turning research, evidence and knowledge into action; acting as the authority on health, wellbeing and policy development; building an intelligent health system and a healthier population.

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*.

The HSE Health and Wellbeing Division welcomes the publication of the Draft Primary Curriculum and in particular the proposed increased time allocation and the allocation of minimum weekly time for wellbeing, placing it at the core of primary education, alongside languages and maths.

Prioritising the wellbeing of children is in line with *Healthy Ireland*, the Government framework to improve health and wellbeing of our population and *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures*, the Government policy, which aims to make Ireland a good place to be a child.

The proposed wellbeing curriculum will support children to learn in a gentle and incremental way about their own social, emotional, physical, spiritual and sexuality development and to respect the human development of others. Through this learning, children will develop the self-awareness and relationship skills to achieve in ways that matter to them, have meaningful relationships with others, to make healthy choices and to develop a healthy sense of themselves in the world.

As wellbeing is such a broad area of learning, studies are usually confined to particular aspects of it. There has been very significant work internationally on social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes. Irish Primary schools have used programmes such as *Fun Friends*, supported by NEPS and *Zippy's Friends*, supported by the HSE. The evidence for the effectiveness of SEL programmes is very strong¹. Evidence from a substantial number of reviews², has shown that when approaches to social and emotional learning are well designed and well implemented it can lead to improvements in:

- academic learning, motivation, and sense of commitment and connectedness with learning and with school.
- staff well-being, reduced stress, sickness and absence, improved teaching ability and performance.
- pupil well-being including happiness, a sense of purpose, connectedness and meaning
- social and emotional skills and attitudes that promote learning, success, well-being and mental health, in school and throughout life.

It also leads to reductions in:

- mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and stress.
- low-level disruption, incidents, fights, bullying, exclusions and absence
- risky behaviour – such as impulsiveness, uncontrolled anger, violence, bullying and crime, early sexual experience, alcohol and drug use.

¹ Zippys Friends Evaluation <https://aran.library.nuigalway.ie/bitstream/handle/10379/2174/05%20-%202010.rep.zippy.friend.summary.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

² Wearre, K., (2015) *What works in promoting social and emotional wellbeing and responding to mental health problems in schools?* <https://developyourchild.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2016/03/NCB-well-being-mental-health-report-2015.pdf>

The HSE Health and Wellbeing Division welcome changes to education policy that evidence has shown would lead to reductions in depression, anxiety, stress, bullying, early sexual experience, alcohol and drug use among children and adolescents. It is the view of HSE Health and Wellbeing that policy changes at this level are required to improve the health and wellbeing of the population in the long term. Better health and wellbeing will also impact positively on schooling. For example, anxiety and depression can impact on school engagement and learning due to the associated symptoms of disrupted sleep patterns, negative rumination, reduced ability to focus and concentrate and lack of motivation. If not addressed, anxiety and depression can lead to school refusal and or/early school leaving, resulting in poorer health and educational outcomes.

The additional time allocation to wellbeing is significant and it is noted that time has been taken from other important subjects. It is the view of HSE Health and Wellbeing that the additional time allocation is the minimum that would be required for the programme to be a success and achieve the positive health and educational outcomes that are associated with increased and improved focus on wellbeing. The rationale for this view is expanded upon below.

Social and Emotional Learning

Significant explicit teaching time is emerging as being a crucial aspect of successful implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). The Education Endowment Foundation for the UK Government³ reviewed the international evidence and undertook a survey with of 436 UK Primary Schools, to develop guidance for schools on how to implement SEL programmes. The resulting report makes six recommendations: teach SEL skills explicitly; integrate SEL skills in everyday teaching; plan carefully for adopting a SEL programme; use a sequenced, active, focused and explicit (SAFE) curriculum; reinforce SEL skills through whole-school ethos and activities; and plan, support and monitor SEL implementation.

The need to explicitly teach social and emotional skills, and the need to use a sequenced, active, focused and explicit curriculum, requires between 30-60 minutes of teaching time per week. Programmes that are 1 hour long have stronger evidence of efficacy. The evidence suggests that the basic SEL skills can be taught over 1 year, with the skills being embedded and developed further in subsequent years. The evidence is also clear that it not enough to model social and emotional skills and foster them through everyday teaching and behaviour management in the classroom, the UK review of SEL evaluations found that SEL skills need to be explicitly taught to gain the desired outcomes.

While SEL could be considered a foundational or key element of wellbeing, it is not the only aspect. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)⁴, the Stay Safe Programme⁵, and the existing Walk Tall programme⁶ also require significant teaching time. If schools have been

³ Accessed on 21/1/2021 https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/guidance-reports/social-and-emotional-learning/?utm_source=site&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_search&search_term=Social%20and%20emotional%20learning

⁴ RSE materials were developed in the late 1990s and have not been updated. Schools are required to teach at least 6 classes of RSE per year.

⁵ *Stay Safe* is a mandatory programme that includes approximately 6 classes per year.

⁶ *Walk Tall* There are approximately 30 lessons in Walk Tall from Junior Infants to 4th class, and approximately 65 lessons for 5th and sixth class.

teaching all of these programmes, they are already teaching more SPHE than the 30 minutes a week. That is before SEL programmes such as *Zippy's Friends*⁷ or *Fun Friends* are introduced. The additional time proposed is necessary to incorporate the existing elements but also to include new approaches to improving wellbeing from the fields of social and emotional learning, positive psychology, cognitive behavioural therapy and mindfulness and expand on certain key areas, such as RSE.

Relationships and Sexuality Education

There is a current national and international focus on the importance of a positive, coherent approach to relationship and sexuality education across a child's schooling. This supports the child to form and maintain healthy relationships, and to understand and appropriately express their sexuality at various stages of development. These are strongly related to all other aspects of a child's development, in particular their psychological and emotional wellbeing. Sexuality education plays a significant role in realising optimal sexual health and wellbeing of children and young people, as well as supporting their sexual and overall development across their lifespan⁸.

In addition to the value for the individual, RSE also contributes to the overall health of the class, school and community environment by interrogating issues and challenging discriminatory and biased attitudes in relation to a wide range of topics, including with regard to sexual minorities. This supports the development of an inclusive mind-set within the school body and the creation of a safe space for children to flourish.

The current Irish RSE curriculum was progressive for its time and continues to have many positives on which we can build. However, it does not fully address the needs of children and young people in today's society. Neither does the allotted time sufficiently allow for the development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to enable healthy behaviour choices throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

There is a body of evidence regarding the characteristics of effective RSE, one of which being importance of sufficient time allocation^{9 10}. As a recent Irish study highlighted, RSE *'is an educational process spread over several years (rather than a series of occasional interventions) that empowers children and young people to make conscious, healthy and respectful choices and have safe and fulfilling relationships'*¹¹.

The 2018 UNESCO publication, *"International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education"*¹², and other national and international literature, provides an evidence base to inform the construction of an updated, effective and spiral RSE curriculum which will be suitable for the Irish context.

⁷ *Zippy's Friends* is a SEL programme for 5-7 year olds. It is a 24 week programme.

⁸ Allen, L., & Rasmussen, M. L. (2017). *The Palgrave handbook of sexuality education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

⁹ Pound P, Denford S, Shucksmith J, et al. (2017) *What is best practice in sex and relationship education? A synthesis of evidence, including stakeholders' views*. BMJ Open

¹⁰ WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA. 2010. *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe: A framework for policy makers, education and health authorities and specialists*. Cologne, BZgA

¹¹ Keating, S., Morgan, M., & Collins, B. (2018). Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in primary and post-primary Irish schools, Research Paper. Dublin. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

¹² Accessed on 24/01/2021 <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ITGSE.pdf>.

Substance Use Education

Issues with substance use can affect a young person's well-being, and is clearly linked to academic underachievement related to problems in cognitive functioning, disengaging from school, truancy and early school leaving¹³. A review of substance use education by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that it is shown to be effective when it starts early and continues right throughout the formal education years¹⁴. It is especially important that it addresses the critical transition periods. Evidence-based substance use programmes can delay the onset of substance use.

Primary school based prevention programmes that have shown to have positive or no negative outcomes are 1) based on developing personal and social skills 2) have 10 or more hours of structured sessions per year and 3) are delivered by trained teachers or facilitators and 4) are interactive in nature.

The *Walk Tall Programme* was originally developed as a substance misuse programme and while it has recently been re-developed to include other aspects of SPHE, it is broadly in line with the UNODC recommendations, with approximately 30 lessons from Junior Infants to 4th class and approximately 60 lessons for 5th and 6th class. Substance use is of great concern to primary school children; a study on what primary school children want to know about, found that alcohol, being drunk, drugs and smoking ranked in the top 4 of requested topics by primary school students¹⁵. Substance use education is a curricular area that has to evolve as behaviour changes and knowledge improves. For example, while smoking rates have decreased in recent years, smoking in childhood remains a public health challenge, exacerbated by the introduction of e-cigarettes; 22% of 12-17 year olds report that they have tried them¹⁶. More recently the 'hidden-harm' of alcohol use in the population has had more attention. It is thought that the harmful use of alcohol by parents/carers impacts an estimated 200k children in Ireland today, affecting their social and emotional development.

Food and Nutrition

While healthy eating is included on the existing SPHE curriculum, it would be beneficial to teach the associated life skills. Preparing meals and cooking are life skills and acquiring them can be a source of confidence for children, particularly children that struggle academically. Evidence indicates that there is a gender disparity in attitudes to cooking and the development of cooking skills, due to Home Economics being viewed as a subject for girls at second level. The introduction of preparing and cooking food on the primary curriculum would be welcomed by HSE Health and Wellbeing and would require additional time to the time currently allocated to nutrition and food.

Physical Education

A successful PE system is required for children to learn fundamental movement and skills associated with sports, dance and games so that they can reap the benefits of regular physical

¹³ Arthur, M.W., Brown, E.C., Briney, J.S., Hawkins, D., Abbott, R.D., Catalano, R.F, Becker, L., Langer, M. and Mueller, M.T. 2015. *Examination of substance use, risk factors, and protective factors on student academic test score performance*. *Journal of School Health*, Vol. 85, No. 8

¹⁴ Accessed on 21/01/2021 https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/27033/1/Education_sector_responses.pdf

¹⁵ Doyle et al. (2010) *What Children Want to Know*, Health Behaviour of School Aged Children report. <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/15046/>

¹⁶ Health Behaviour of School Aged Children survey (2018) <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dc26c4-irish-health-behaviour-in-school-aged-children-study-2018/>

activity and being involved in sports¹⁷. It is noted that wellbeing includes physical education and it may be assumed that most schools will increase the time allocation to PE in line with the increased allocation for wellbeing, through it is not specifically defined in consultation document. While some flexibility might be welcomed by schools, particularly schools that do not have sufficient PE facilities, it may be necessary to have a specified increased time requirement for PE.

*The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study (2018)*¹⁸ found that one in five primary school children report getting less than 30 minutes of PE per week. While the reasons for this are not clear, if it becomes officially acceptable to offer 30 minutes or less of PE per week, the draft curriculum could be criticised as de-valuing PE and would put Ireland in a very unfavourable position in relation to PE in comparison to other European countries.

A *Worldwide Survey of World Physical Education (2013)*¹⁹ by UNESCO found that the mean weekly time allocation to PE is 109 minutes in Europe, with a range of 30 – 290 minutes. HSE Health and Wellbeing suggests 90 minutes as a **minimum** weekly time allocation for PE and that a physical literacy approach is taken for PE, where the learning outcomes focus on ensuring that children have the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to take part in physical activity on a daily basis during their childhood years.

The health and wellbeing of children is inextricably linked to their school experience. A warm nurturing school experience matters to all children and particularly those who are disadvantaged or experience trauma related to poverty, homelessness, parental addiction, parental mental health problems, the death of a parent or sibling or a myriad of other life experiences that children and families go through that affect children in all schools. Caring for a child's social, emotional and behavioural needs is part of the role of the primary school teacher, though this often goes unrecognised. The additional time allocation for wellbeing and the allocation of minimum weekly time, formally recognises that caring for a child's wellbeing and teaching them to understand their own human development is as important in primary level education as languages and maths.

¹⁷ Better cardio-respiratory and muscular fitness, stronger bones, better cardio-vascular and metabolic health, healthier body-fat composition, reduced anxiety and depression.

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/our-priority-programmes/heal/heal-docs/the-national-guidelines-on-physical-activity-for-ireland.pdf>

¹⁸ Accessed on 24/01/2021 https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/2019-10/csppa-2018-final-report_1.pdf

¹⁹ Accessed on 24/01/2021 <https://en.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/e-teams/quality-physical-education-qpe-policy-project/documents/world-wide-survey-school-physical>

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:

- 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 or you can contact the NCCA's Data Protection Officer at dpo@ncca.ie.

Thank you for your submission.

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie