



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Cúrsaíom agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Information note for the *Primary Curriculum Framework*

March, 2023

Introduction

Ireland's *Primary School Curriculum* introduced in 1999 has served our primary education system well over the past two decades. However, developments in education nationally and internationally, as well as changes in our society have created an impetus to reimagine the future for Ireland's children and citizens. This has been the focus of the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in recent years.

This note provides a brief overview of the development process of the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, the key messages that underpin it, the components of a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum, and ongoing developments.

You can also find a Frequently Asked Questions document on our website: www.ncca.ie.

The development process

The process of developing the *Primary Curriculum Framework* for all primary and special schools engaged stakeholders from across the system in its design. It was developed through four interconnected areas of activity including:

- 1. Research:** the development work drew on an extensive body of contemporary national and international research located [here](#) on the NCCA website. It also drew on the [Children's School Lives](#) (CSL) study, the national longitudinal study which reports on the experiences of 4,000 children in 189 primary schools in Ireland.
- 2. Networks:** the Schools Forum, a network consisting of 57 schools, largely made up of primary schools and including some post-primary, preschools and special schools, from across the country have worked together on a sustained basis to tease out ideas from research, bringing their school experiences to discussions.
- 3. Deliberations:** close work with the education partners through the representative [structures of the NCCA](#), and with wider stakeholders through events such as [curriculum seminars](#), and the [Leading Out](#) seminar series.
- 4. Consultation:** findings from the extensive consultation on the [Draft Primary Curriculum Framework](#), including a consultation with [primary school-aged children](#), were integral to the finalisation of the framework; as well as other recent consultations including proposals on [curriculum structure and time](#); and on development in [language](#) and [mathematics](#).

The *Primary Curriculum Framework*

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* reflects our shared understanding of, and trust in, the many positive features of education in our primary and special schools. It supports boards of management in their statutory duties to ensure that appropriate education is provided for all children in our schools and it acknowledges their responsibilities regarding the characteristic spirit of the school.

The framework sets out the vision; principles; key competencies; structure; approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment; and time allocations for a redeveloped curriculum. The

framework also provides the blueprint for guiding the enhancement of primary and special education for the coming years.

The framework:

- is for all primary and special schools
- sets the vision and principles for a redeveloped curriculum
- introduces key competencies for children's learning
- sets out the main features and components for the full redevelopment of the *Primary School Curriculum*, detailing curriculum areas and subjects; and time allocations
- introduces and expands aspects of learning including STEM Education, Modern Foreign Languages, Technology, and a broader Arts Education
- holds increased emphasis on existing areas such as Physical Education and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) (Wellbeing), and digital learning
- provides greater agency and flexibility for teachers and children.

The framework also links with learning experiences provided through the themes of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and connects with the subjects, key skills and statements of learning in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.

Key changes from the current *Primary School Curriculum*

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* builds on the successes and strengths associated with the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to challenges and changing needs and priorities.

The current curriculum has provided enhanced enjoyment of learning, an increased use of active methodologies, and improved attainment in reading, mathematics and science as evidenced in national and international assessments. The redeveloped curriculum will build on these successes and address curriculum overload at primary level, taking stock of strategies, initiatives and programmes while clarifying priorities for children's learning. It will support continuity and progression in children's learning in preschool settings through *Aistear- the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and into their experiences in post-primary through the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* supports agency and flexibility.

The framework recognises teachers' and principals' agency and professionalism to enact the curriculum in their individual school context, by providing more flexibility to schools in terms of planning and timetabling in order to identify and respond to priorities and opportunities. The framework connects with different school contexts, recognising the need for flexibility, in how schools work with the curriculum. The redeveloped curriculum will provide greater opportunities for flexibility and choice for children's learning through the use of learning outcomes in specifications.

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* connects what and how children learn across preschool, primary and post-primary schools.

The framework provides a clear vision for children's learning across the eight years of primary school and links with learning experiences provided through the themes of the *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and connects with the subjects, key skills and statements of learning in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*. It also supports children as they move from one setting to another by connecting with what and how children learn at home, in preschool and post-primary school.

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* identifies updated priorities for children's learning.

The framework embeds seven key competencies across children's learning outcomes from junior infants to sixth class which focus on developing children's skills, knowledge and dispositions, values and attitudes. It has increased emphasis on some existing areas such as Physical Education (PE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and digital learning, and introduces new aspects of the curriculum such as Modern Foreign Languages, Technology, and a broader Arts Education.

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* changes how the curriculum is structured and presented.

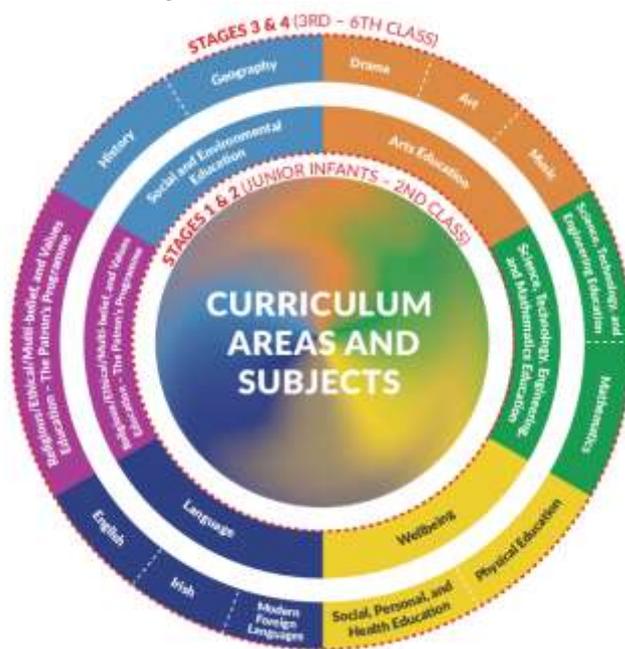
The framework is structured in five broad curriculum areas;

- Language
- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education
- Wellbeing
- Arts Education
- Social and Environmental Education.

The framework provides for an integrated learning experience, with curriculum areas in stages 1 and 2 (Junior infants – Second Class). These areas recognise younger children's ages and stage of development, and give the teacher greater choice in preparing for and facilitating rich learning experiences through playful and engaging approaches.

The curriculum supports older children's learning and development in stages 3 and 4 (Third to Sixth Class) by building on the curriculum areas of stages 1 and 2 and becoming more differentiated into subjects to reflect children's growing awareness of subjects as a way of organising the world.

Figure 1: Curriculum areas and subjects



In addition to the five curriculum areas, school patrons have a legal right to design their own programme in accordance with the characteristic spirit of their school. This programme forms part of children’s learning experience in primary and special schools.

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* supports a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning.

The framework promotes high quality teaching, learning and assessment, and considers assessment as an essential part of teaching and learning. The framework highlights the importance of teachers’ professional judgement in supporting children’s learning, and encourages teachers to make meaningful connections with children’s interests and experiences. Importantly, it recognises the significance of quality relationships and their impact on children’s learning, and the role and influence of parents and families in children’s education.

Suggested time allocations

The suggested time allocations for a redeveloped *Primary School Curriculum* have come in for some attention in recent media articles.

The current *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) provides minimum time allocations on a weekly basis. In accordance with *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*, the time allocations for literacy and numeracy were increased. The impact of this change to the time allocations became evident during the consultation on [Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum](#) (2018). The overarching findings related to time allocations from the [Consultation on proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum](#), include:

- support for changing how time is allocated across the curriculum
- strong support for schools having greater flexibility in deciding how time is allocated in the curriculum

- strong support for the restoration of Flexible Time, which had been impacted by the literacy and numeracy strategy
- general agreement for the proposal of two categories of time allocation (Flexible Time and Minimum State Curriculum Time)
- concern for the amount of time allocated to Physical Education (PE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)
- concern that in a redeveloped curriculum, some subjects may 'lose out' in a review of how time is allocated.

Taking these findings into account, the *Primary Curriculum Framework* presents time allocations in two categories: Minimum Curriculum Time (weekly and monthly) and Flexible Time (monthly). The time allocations are intended to be used flexibly, in order to embrace integrative learning, avail of unexpected learning opportunities, pace learning in response to children's needs, and support immersive and engaging learning experiences.

In response to the strong calls for greater flexibility and increased time for PE and SPHE, the framework presents a monthly block of Flexible Time and an increase of the weekly time allocation for Wellbeing (PE and SPHE) from 1.5 hours to 3 hours.

To make these changes, all other areas of the curriculum have relinquished some time. For Language 1 the time was reduced by:

- 45 minutes a week in stage 1
- 15 minutes a week in stage 2
- 60 minutes a week in stages 3 and 4.

The reduction in Language 1 of the school considers the children's experience of two free preschool years as part of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. Recent figures indicate that approximately 97% of children avail of this programme and benefit from their language learning experiences through *Aistear- the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Introduced in 2009, this framework or the ECCE programme was not available to children attending primary and special schools when the suggested time allocations of the current Primary School Curriculum were published.

The increased reduction of time in stages 3 and 4 is a consequence of introducing a Modern Foreign Language (MFL) to primary school children. This gained strong support during consultations with children, parents and the wider public, with some teachers and school leaders indicating the implementation challenges associated with the introduction of a MFL.

Language 2 (Irish in English-medium schools, and English in Irish-medium schools) of the school remains unchanged for stage 1 (2.5 hours a week) and is reduced by 30 minutes in stages 2 – 4 (from 3.5 hours to 3 hours a week).

Mathematics is reduced by 25 minutes in stage 1 and by 10 minutes in stages 2 – 4.

Arts Education – incorporating media arts and dance in a broader approach to arts education – is reduced by 15 minutes a week in stage 1, 45 minutes a week in stage 2, and 60 minutes a week in stages 3 and 4.

As the curriculum areas of Social and Environmental Education (SEE), and the subject of Science, Technology, and Engineering Education have been reconfigured in the redeveloped primary curriculum, it is not possible to make a direct comparison from the current curriculum to the new.

The Religious/Ethical/Multi-belief and Values Education – the Patron’s Programme¹ of the school has been reduced by 50 minutes a week in stage 1, and by 30 minutes a week in stages 2 – 4.

Roll call and assembly time, has been combined and halved from 2.5 hours a week to 1 hour 15 minutes a week.

All times changes calculated above are based on the adjustments made in *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* and through circular 56/2011.

Ongoing developments

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* will guide the development of the specifications for each of the curriculum areas. The NCCA has established Development Groups for each curriculum area and a draft specification will be available for public consultation in 2024. The NCCA envisages the completion of the development of all curriculum area specifications in 2025. A timeline for schools’ work in enacting the redeveloped curriculum will be set out by the Department of Education. For more information on Development Groups click on the link below:

[Boards and Development Groups | NCCA](#)

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