

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment published the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* for public consultation in February 2020 as part of its review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. This article presents the key proposals for a redeveloped curriculum contained in the draft framework, and describes the reconfigured consultation process during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

2020 saw the publication of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) as part of the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. Though greatly overshadowed by Covid-19, it is a significant step in giving stakeholders an opportunity to have their say in shaping a redeveloped primary curriculum.

This article begins by outlining six key messages about the draft framework, then describes the three complementary strands of NCCA's consultation: Fieldwork, Communications, and Stakeholder Engagement, all of which have been impacted by Covid-19.

Draft Primary Curriculum Framework: Key messages

The draft framework is framed around a set of six key messages which, taken together, represent the main features and significant changes proposed for the redeveloped primary curriculum. These are outlined below.

1. *Building on strengths and responding to challenges*

The draft framework seeks to build on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum. These include teachers' increased use of active learning methodologies, children's enhanced enjoyment of learning, and improved attainment levels in reading, mathematics, and science, as evidenced in national and international assessments.

Simultaneously, the draft framework responds to key challenges identified by schools, such as curriculum overload and using assessment in a meaningful way to inform teaching and learning. Taking account of strategies, initiatives, and programmes from the last number of years, the draft framework proposes priorities for children's learning during the eight years of primary education.

Primary Curriculum Review

Consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*



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2. Agency and flexibility for schools

The draft framework proposes increased agency and flexibility for schools, recognising the variety of school contexts and providing for learning environments that support the learning of every child. Within this, teachers' and school leaders' agency and professionalism to enact the curriculum in their school context are foregrounded. Proposals on time allocations and curriculum structure aim to increase flexibility for schools in planning and timetabling, allowing them to respond to their own priorities and opportunities.

3. Supporting connections

The draft framework supports transitions between primary school and home, preschool and post-primary school. It provides a vision for children's learning across the eight years of primary school, which links with learning experiences provided through the themes of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and connects with the subjects, key skills, and statements of learning in the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015).

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Acknowledging that children come to primary school with a rich and varied set of learning experiences, the draft framework aims to build on such learning as children progress through primary school and move to post-primary school. It supports educational transitions, a topic covered

by Dr Thomas Walsh in his article in the Early Childhood section of this Yearbook.

4. Emerging priorities for children's learning

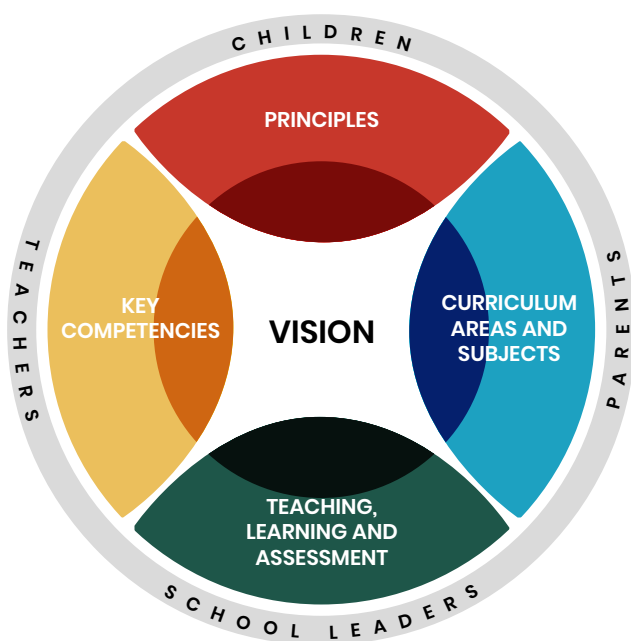
The draft framework responds to priorities that have emerged for children's learning over the past two decades. It offers proposals that are responsive to such priorities, including giving more time and prominence to well-being; introducing new areas such as modern foreign languages from third class, and Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics; broadening the arts education area; and increasing the focus on technology.



The draft framework contains seven key competencies, which extend beyond skills and knowledge to also take account of dispositions, attitudes, and values that will enable children to adapt and deal with a range of situations and challenges (see Key Competencies image). It proposes embedding these competencies in learning outcomes in all curriculum areas and subjects.

5. Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented

The draft framework proposes a change in the curriculum's structure and presentation (see Curriculum Overview image). Moving from subjects to broad curriculum areas in the first four years of primary school seeks to support a more integrated approach to teaching and learning. Five broad curriculum areas are proposed: Language; Mathematics, Science and Technology Education; Wellbeing; Social and Environmental Education; and Arts Education.



Curriculum overview

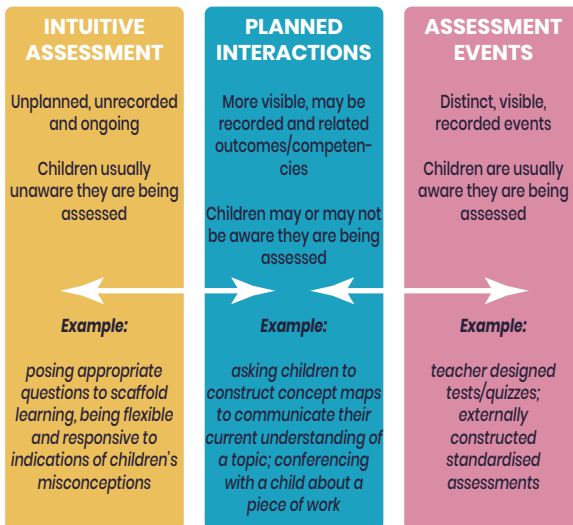
STAGES 1 AND 2 (JUNIOR INFANTS - 2 ND CLASS)	LANGUAGE (IRISH AND ENGLISH)	MATHEMATICS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION	WELLBEING	ARTS EDUCATION*	SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION	RELIGIOUS/ ETHICAL/ MULTI-BELIEF EDUCATION - PATRON'S PROGRAMME
STAGES 3 AND 4 (3 RD - 6 TH CLASS)	IRISH ENGLISH MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES	MATHEMATICS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY	PHYSICAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND VALUES EDUCATION	VISUAL ARTS MUSIC DRAMA (AND OTHER ASPECTS, E.G. DANCE, FILM, DIGITAL MEDIA)	HISTORY GEOGRAPHY	RELIGIOUS/ ETHICAL/ MULTI-BELIEF EDUCATION - PATRON'S PROGRAMME

Curriculum areas and subjects

* Broad learning outcomes in Art Education would continue to support learning in visual arts, music and drama, as well as supporting other aspects of arts education such as dance, film and digital media, and enabling schools to engage with local, national and international initiatives and opportunities. The learning outcomes would also support integrated learning experiences in stages 1-2. While disciplines within Arts Education have a common creative process and share transferable skills, each has its own knowledge, concept and skills. Subject specific learning outcomes in stages 3-4 alongside a set of broader outcomes overarching the subjects, would ensure children experience a broad and balanced Arts Education.

While these areas would become more differentiated into subjects from third class onwards, experiences and activities supporting children's learning across the curriculum would remain important. Further to the five areas, the Patron's Programme is developed by a school's patron. It aims to contribute to the child's holistic development, particularly from the religious or ethical perspective, and in the process it underpins and supports the characteristic spirit of the school (see Curriculum Areas and Subjects image).

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



Continuum of assessment

The draft framework emphasises high-quality teaching, learning, and assessment. It highlights the importance of curriculum integration, inclusive practice, inquiry-based learning, and playful pedagogy. Assessment is conceptualised as an essential and central part of teachers' daily practice and is presented on a continuum ranging from 'intuitive' to 'planned interactions' to 'assessment events' (see Continuum of Assessment image). Assessment in the redeveloped curriculum draws on key ideas in *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for*

Schools (NCCA, 2007) and supports the progression of each child towards the curriculum vision.

Importantly, the draft framework recognises the role and influence of parents and families in children's education. In placing significance on quality relationships and their impact on children's learning, it encourages teachers to make meaningful connections with children's interests and experiences.

Consultation: Three interconnected strands

A consultation process based on the six key messages was originally designed to run until the end of October. Following Covid-19 and the closure of schools and settings, this timeline was extended to the end of 2020. The impact of the pandemic on the education system will continue to be monitored closely, and adjustments will be made to the consultation's design and timeframe as needed.

Based on the current situation in late September, it is likely that a second consultation phase will take place in the 2021/22 school year. This two-phased approach is in direct response to the ongoing challenges facing school communities and indeed all education stakeholders, and to the necessity to engage meaningfully with and hear directly from teachers, children, parents, and school leaders in the consultation.

The consultation is structured around three interconnected strands of activity:

- Fieldwork
- Communications
- Stakeholder Engagement

The fieldwork strand aims to provide a way for anybody wishing to respond to the draft framework to do so. Options include questionnaires for both educators and parents, as well as written submission templates which are available on the NCCA website. The need to adapt the initial consultation plan to take account of evolving public health advice and challenges faced by the education system resulted in a significant amount of consultation activity moving online. For instance, information sessions and bilateral meetings with stakeholders have taken place online. Marino Institute of Education, on behalf of NCCA, will be carrying out a consultation with children on the key messages. Additional online materials for schools and preschools are available to support self-organised consultation workshops. Full consultation details are available at www.ncca.ie/primary.

“ Assessment is conceptualised as an essential and central part of teachers' daily practice.”

The communications strand seeks to build awareness across the education system and the public generally. This is supported through the availability of different response formats, encouraging as wide an engagement as possible. Three messages underpin the communications strand:

- the directions for change in the redeveloped primary curriculum – essentially, answering the question, *What's different compared to the 1999 curriculum?*
- the processes involved in reviewing the curriculum and developing the draft framework
- the promotion of different ways people can contribute to the consultation.

To maximise reach and impact, communication strategies and tools are tailored to reach different audiences. A dedicated consultation section is provided on the NCCA website which presents all consultation materials and tools for users. Print and broadcast media along with a social media campaign have featured news items on the consultation. A series of e-bulletins highlight key milestones in the curriculum review process, while partner networks also support the dissemination of information.

Reflecting research and literature on curriculum change, NCCA is collaborating with partners in education to identify opportunities and challenges that arise during times of change. To support this stakeholder engagement work, a series of 'Leading Out' seminars have been organised to support coordinated and purposeful planning for introducing the redeveloped curriculum. Topics such as supporting teacher agency, professional development, and policy alignment are under consideration.

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Supporting this process is the work of an international advisory panel, which includes Professor Louise Hayward (University of Glasgow), Professor James Spillane (Northwestern University), Professor Dominic Wyse (University College London), and Dr Thomas Walsh (Maynooth University). Established in early 2020 by NCCA, the panel engages in collective discussion and deliberation while providing important insights and observations based on their experience and expertise.

In conclusion

The consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* is the first time in over twenty years that teachers, school leaders, children, parents, management bodies, patrons, the wider education sector, and the general public have had an opportunity to consider the primary curriculum as a whole, and its interface with *Aistear* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.

Unsurprisingly, the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing public health advice has required that the consultation be reoriented. It has required a move to online platforms for engagement and data gathering, with the cancellation of all face-to-face arrangements. While the means of consulting and the timeline are different from the original plan, the consultation is ongoing, and NCCA will continue to monitor and adjust plans in the hope that everyone wishing to have their voice heard during the consultation will be able to do so.