

Subject:

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Curriculum Planning for Post Primary Schools 2021/22

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Target Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all post primary and special grant-aided schools
- Education Authority (EA)
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)
- Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC)
- Proprietors of Independent Schools
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)
- General Teaching Council for NI (GTCNI)
- Teachers' Unions
- EOTAS Centres
- Middletown Centre for Autism
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS)

Summary of Contents:

This circular provides advice and guidance to schools on curriculum planning for the 2021/22 academic year

Enquiries:

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Guidance for schools

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This circular provides advice and guidance to post primary schools.

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Curriculum Planning for Post Primary Schools 2021/22

Introduction

1. This circular aims to provide guidance and advice to post primary schools as they plan for the 2021/22 academic year. Its content is designed to reaffirm the professional expertise of our teachers and existing good planning practices found in our schools, who are providing high quality learning experiences that meet the needs, interests and abilities of pupils.
2. Much of the information within this circular is not new but summarises the wide range of information available around curriculum planning and remote learning for the 2021/22 academic year. Relevant Departmental guidance is signposted throughout.
3. Whilst the vaccination programme means that we can approach planning for 2021/22 with cautious optimism, the public health situation can change rapidly. The big picture in planning for 2021/22 is, therefore, the continued flexibility and agility which our schools have shown throughout the pandemic. Further guidance will be provided and this circular will be updated as the context changes. The Department will publish separate COVID-19 Guidance for schools and education settings.
4. In addition to this circular, schools will be aware that CCEA provides a wide range of curriculum resources and has also launched a [Wellbeing Hub](#), which includes a range of resources and links to support children's health and wellbeing.

Key Messages

- Schools have the freedom to tailor and adapt delivery of the NI curriculum to continue to support recovery.
- The flexibility of the Northern Ireland (NI) curriculum aims to empower schools to make the decisions needed to provide a curriculum that is adaptable and responsive to the needs of individual learners.
- The aim in 2021/22 is to support pupils to be motivated to learn and towards becoming skilled and independent learners through a curriculum that gives equal emphasis to knowledge, understanding and skills.
- Gaps in curriculum coverage and children's understanding are complex issues. Children's needs will vary and not all gaps can – or should – be addressed immediately. As part of a well sequenced curriculum, however, teachers will have identified the key knowledge and concepts that need further embedded before children can move on. There are undoubtedly key knowledge, skills, vocabulary, and concepts which allow pupils to make sense of later work and which should be prioritised.
- The Department expects to see the resumption of practical activities across the curriculum for all post primary pupils in 2021/22. This requires access to specialist equipment and accommodation. It is no longer appropriate for post primary pupils to receive teaching and learning in a single base classroom with limited access to specialist accommodation.
- Schools will wish to consider and reflect explicitly on how they are developing the whole curriculum thinking skills in each Area of Learning.
- The Department recommends that schools should provide pupils with at least two hours of curricular PE each week. Two hours of good quality provision contributes to the well-being and development of resilience and allows for the progression of skills, knowledge and understanding in the range of activity areas that make up the PE curriculum.
- In 2021/22, it is again strongly recommended that schools allow children to come to school in their PE uniform on relevant days to minimise the need for changing.

- Schools should continue to contingency plan for the delivery of remote learning in the event of local or wider school closures, or that a class or a large group of pupils within the class need to self-isolate. Schools will wish to have detailed plans in place.
- Remote learning should not be used to facilitate any other circumstances.

The NI Curriculum

5. The NI curriculum is designed to help our children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century. The Department suggests, therefore, that the starting point for all schools in 2021/22 should again be how best in these unique circumstances to continue to deliver the spirit of the statutory curriculum in each area of learning to meet the needs of children and young people.
6. Schools will wish to consider how they tailor and adapt delivery of the curriculum to continue to support recovery. The flexibility of the curriculum aims to empower schools to make the decisions needed to provide a curriculum that is adaptable and responsive to the needs of individual learners. The curriculum is designed to have limited prescription giving schools as much flexibility as possible in what they choose to teach, for how long and how often and to use approaches that best suit their pupils.
7. **Schools have the freedom within the minimum entitlement of the statutory curriculum to develop content they believe is best suited to meet the needs and interests of the pupils within their school community at this particular time.**
8. The flexible NI Curriculum is designed to enable schools to contextualize and make changes as deemed necessary at present. School leaders and teachers can use their knowledge and professional expertise to adapt their usual plans and practice to suit their own unique circumstances providing the content they consider is best for their pupils, informed by their inherent understanding of the children in their school community.

Curriculum Planning

9. The key message again across the system in 2021/22 is that the aim is to support pupils to be motivated to learn and towards becoming skilled and independent learners through a curriculum that gives equal emphasis to knowledge, understanding and skills.
10. It is an important time for schools to think about curriculum intent, implementation and impact, with the aim of developing a curriculum that is:
- broad and balanced for all pupils;
 - ambitious and stretching for all pupils;
 - coherently planned and appropriately sequenced; and
 - successfully adapted, designed and developed for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities
11. It is also important for school leaders and teachers to reflect on how their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic can transform learning experiences more permanently. In particular, schools have harnessed and utilised the suite of available technological tools to create content for remote learning across all Areas of Learning. Teachers have rapidly upskilled in the craft on online pedagogy. This has created new possibilities to do things differently and with greater flexibility. For example, audio marking has enhanced teacher feedback significantly. Platforms such as Mentimeter (brainstorming), Quizlet Live (flash cards) and Kahoot! (quizzes) often improve on equivalent in-class activities.
12. Gaps in curriculum coverage and children's understanding are complex issues. Children's needs will vary and not all gaps can – or should – be addressed immediately. However, as part of a well sequenced curriculum, teachers will have identified the key knowledge and concepts that need further embedded before children can move on. There are undoubtedly key knowledge, skills, vocabulary, and concepts which allow pupils to make sense of later work and which should be prioritised.
13. Many schools will have already identified for each year group the key or core concepts and skills that are addressed in each area of learning. In some Areas of

Learning it will be particularly important to ensure pupils are secure in key underpinning knowledge and skills and schools may choose at the outset of the academic year to review these key concepts so that pupils are secure in the ideas that underpin them. It also remains crucial in curricular areas such as Mathematics to take the time to practise rather than moving through curriculum content too quickly.

14. Well-targeted interventions for example through the Engage 2 Programme or other targeted support can complement decisions about curriculum prioritisation and teaching. It is important that any additional interventions are explicitly linked to the content of daily lessons and that systems for feedback are effective, so that pupils experience the curriculum as a coherent whole

Practical Work in Schools

15. The Department would emphasise that it is extremely important that pupils at post primary school have access to subject specialists and enjoy the full breadth and balance of the curriculum.
16. Social distancing requirements have been relaxed between pupils in schools and should not be a barrier to the delivery of practical subjects. The practical elements of a wide range of subjects ensure high quality teaching and continue to develop essential skills across all Areas of Learning.
17. Schools know the importance of practical work which provides opportunities for experiential learning, increasing independence and group work, as well as the skills which are core to many subjects and a key component of many qualification assessments.
18. **The Department expects to see the resumption of practical activities across the curriculum for all post primary pupils in 2021/22. This requires access to specialist equipment and accommodation to continue to develop essential skills across all Areas of Learning.**

19. **In practice, this is likely to mean that in subjects without practical content teachers may continue to move between classes, but where practical content requires it, schools should plan for all year groups to have regular access to specialist accommodation.**
20. Passing briefly in the corridor or playground is low risk and is not considered close contact. **It is no longer appropriate for post primary pupils to receive teaching and learning in a single base classroom with limited access to specialist accommodation.**
21. The Department's circular 2021/14 [Practical Work in Post-Primary Schools](#) provides more detailed advice and assistance to post primary schools, as they plan for the delivery of practical work within the curriculum during the 2021/22 academic year.

Physical Education

22. PE is a compulsory element of the curriculum at both Key Stages 3 and 4. All children should have regular access to PE within the curriculum. Schools will appreciate the positive impact that physical exercise can have on young people's health and wellbeing.
23. **The Department recommends that schools should provide children and young people with at least two hours of curricular PE each week and this recommendation has never been more important.** Two hours of good quality provision contributes to the well-being and development of resilience and allows for the progression of skills, knowledge and understanding in the range of activity areas that make up the PE curriculum.
24. We know that PE has a wide range of both physical and emotional benefits. In recent years, there is also a growing evidence base to suggest that physical activity has the potential to support learning more broadly. Research has shown that physical activity can improve short-term memory, reaction time and creativity; it increases attention span, coordination and complex thinking and enhances

behaviour and academic achievement. The Department, therefore, highlights its critical importance at this difficult time during the COVID-19 pandemic.

25. Schools will note that both indoor and outdoor PE are permitted without COVID related restrictions on the numbers of participants. In the delivery of PE and wider sporting activities, schools should have due regard to wider public health requirements and the guidance provided by individual sporting governing bodies around safe delivery.

26. **In 2021/22, it is again strongly recommended that schools allow children to come to school in their PE uniform on relevant days to minimise the need for changing. Changing rooms continue to be considered a higher risk environment and schools should minimise the need for changing wherever possible. This approach also provides extended time for PE and Games within the curriculum.**

Curriculum at Key Stage 4 and Post-16 – Delivery of CCEA Qualifications

27. In May 2020, the Education Minister announced a package of significant reductions in assessment across all CCEA qualifications in 2021/22. A unit of study will be omitted from the assessment of the vast majority of CCEA GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications in 2022 for pupils in Years 12, 13 and 14. Unit omissions have also been applied across the wide range of CCEA Entry Level, Occupational Studies and Vocationally Related qualifications. For details see [CCEA Summer 2022 Awarding](#).

28. Young people will, therefore, have significantly fewer examinations to prepare for in order to free up additional time for teaching and learning. This will also give flexibility in the event of further local level disruption during the 2021/22 academic year.

29. **In planning for the delivery of these qualifications, however, it is essential that all schools should aim to cover as much of the specification as possible to support progression. At this time, no school should plan to teach the**

mandatory units of qualifications only. This will be monitored by the Department.

30. CCEA has also provided a recommended teaching order in regard to GCSE units for those pupils entering Year 11 in September 2021. This will make it easier to make changes to qualifications for this year group if needed. The Department would strongly recommend that schools make every effort to adhere to the teaching order.

The importance of Skills for Learning

31. The central importance of the development of the thinking skills and personal capabilities at the heart of the Northern Ireland curriculum has been underlined by recent events. Coping with the high level of uncertainty and change presented by the COVID-19 pandemic requires adaptability and psychological resilience. This has underlined the key importance of skills and personal capabilities including creativity, curiosity, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, collaboration, communication, growth mindset and global competence.

Whole Curriculum Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities

- ✓ Managing Information,
- ✓ Thinking, Problem Solving, Decision Making
- ✓ Being Creative
- ✓ Working with Others and
- ✓ Self-Management

32. Schools will wish, therefore, to consider and reflect on how they are developing the whole curriculum thinking skills in each Area of Learning. It is vital that we make the skills for learning in a school environment explicit to our pupils to reskill and rebuild their confidence as learners following the disruption of the past two academic years.

33. CCEA has developed a number of resources to support schools in embedding thinking skills and capabilities into learning, teaching and assessment (<https://ccea.org.uk/foundation-stage/curriculum/thinking-skills-personal-capabilities>)

34. School leaders and staff know that meta-learning – learning how to learn and developing self-knowledge about strategies and behaviours for learning – is a key element of the curriculum. Encouraging pupils to reflect on how they learn and equipping them with a 'growth mindset' are particularly important skills at this time when pupils may have to learn more independently during periods of remote learning.

Re-Engaging with Learning

35. Given the extent of disruption across two academic years, some pupils may return to school in September disengaged and require support to re-engage and move on with learning. As always, schools will recognise the need to identify and support those pupils who are most likely to experience difficulties in engaging with learning.

36. In considering curriculum delivery, schools will be considering how they can design motivational learning activities to specifically increase behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. Teachers will do much of this instinctively but at the present time it is important to reflect on, discuss and plan to develop pupils' engagement explicitly. Schools may wish to plan for this learning in part through the delivery of the Learning for Life and Work area of learning, with opportunities to consolidate this learning across the curriculum. In doing this, it may be useful to consider the key principles below.

- i. **Purposeful learning.** To increase pupil engagement it is important to show why the learning matters and explicitly help pupils to understand how what they are learning in school relates to their lives and how it matters to them in school and beyond. Connecting with pupils' previous knowledge and experiences may help teachers to design a learning task

that is personally meaningful and make connections between new information and previous knowledge.

- ii. **Foster a sense of competence.** Research has found that effectively performing an activity can positively impact on subsequent engagement. When children feel competent, they have a sense of themselves as being capable to tackle the tasks and challenges they encounter. Pupils' sense of competence in learning can be enhanced by providing learning opportunities which are only slightly beyond their current level of proficiency and allowing them to demonstrate understanding throughout.
- iii. **Collaborative learning,** Engagement may be strengthened due to experiencing a sense of connection to others. To make group work more productive, strategies can be implemented to ensure that pupils know how to communicate and behave in that setting. Teacher modelling is one effective method and fostering individual accountability by assigning different roles, and evaluating both the pupil and the group performance also support collaborative learning.
- iv. **Providing supported autonomy.** Pupils are given a sense of control rather than promoting compliance. Allowing pupils to have some choice and control can help instill ownership and responsibility for their own learning. This can be implemented by involving pupils in setting learning objectives; welcoming pupils' opinions into the flow of the activity; facilitating a self-directed learning process and giving pupils time to understand and absorb the task by themselves.
- v. **Promote mastery orientations.** Pupils' perspective of learning activities also determines their level of engagement. When pupils pursue a task because they want to learn and understand (i.e. mastery orientations), rather than for example to obtain a good grade, please their parents, or outperform peers (i.e. performance orientations), their engagement is more likely to be full and thorough.

Recovery Conversations

37. Pupils have now been living with the COVID-19 pandemic for a significant amount of time and schools will wish to continue to consider the way they address the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in the school environment. A key focus within the curriculum is nurturing children's relationships with parents, peers and staff.
38. Every child will have experienced the pandemic uniquely. Some, despite restrictions, will have felt safe and mostly enjoyed the additional time with their families. For others, it will have been challenging or even traumatic. It is clearly important to help pupils share and reflect on their experiences, to help them consolidate their thinking and continue to move forward during uncertain times.
39. Schools will continue to think about how they will acknowledge the collective experience of recent events. Assemblies are now more likely to happen in small groups or digitally, but are an important way to give positive messages and encourage a sense of belonging to the school community, particularly as the new school year begins.
40. Many children will want to talk about what has happened and engage in conversations about their experiences in classes and small groups. Schools may wish to deliberately scaffold conversations to identify and acknowledge both negatives and positives in recent experiences. Schools may, for example, wish to open a dialogue where pupils and staff (separately or together) start to consider what has been good (a gain/improvement) or bad (a loss/concern) about the changes to educational arrangements. Conversations may also for example consider how recent experiences stand in relation to the school's core values.
41. As the term continues schools will wish to provide:
- continued opportunities for children and young people to talk about their experiences of the last two years;
 - opportunities for one-to-one conversations with trusted adults where this may be supportive;

- some refocussed lessons on relevant topics, for example, mental wellbeing or staying safe;
- pastoral activity, such as positive opportunities to renew and develop friendships and peer groups; and
- a variety of enriching creative and developmental activities, with the importance of arts education being particularly recognised.

Remote Learning

42. As in normal circumstances, if pupils are ill they should take time to rest and recover and should not be working from home.

43. If an individual child or a small number of pupils within a class or across a year group have to self-isolate for a designated period due to COVID-19, the Department has advised that parents should talk directly to their school about provision of education materials. Schools will wish to support pupils as much as possible, however, clearly in these circumstances teachers will be continuing to teach all classes during the school day so expectations must be realistic.

44. Schools should continue to contingency plan for the delivery of remote learning in the event of local or wider school closures, or that a class or a large group of pupils within the class need to self-isolate. In the current public health context, schools will wish to have detailed plans in place.

45. The Department's Circular 2021/01 [Guidance on Remote Learning](#) provides advice and guidance to schools on supporting remote learning. It outlines a range of key principles which should underpin schools' remote learning programme. The Department has also simplified its remote learning guidance into a one-page, quick glance document for schools entitled [Effective Practice in Remote Learning](#)

46. It is increasingly evident that the most effective models of learning during periods of remote learning have a well-balanced combination of both synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Rather than teaching online all the time pupils will for

example receive instructions from online resources or synchronous meetings, conduct inquiry, develop work individually or within small groups, and make presentations in large class synchronous meetings. Asynchronous materials such as videos of lessons are important learning tools. The Department would also particularly emphasise the important of creating opportunities for paired or small group work. The introduction of virtual break-out rooms is a key tool enabling collaborative small-group work.

47. Schools should only employ remote learning in circumstances where a class or group of pupils are required to self-isolate because of COVID-19, or in the event the school has to close due to COVID-19. It should not be used to facilitate any other circumstances such as revision time for school examinations. The Department recognises the significant pressures that schools have faced during the current pandemic. It is, however, extremely important that we maximise face-to-face teaching for pupils following the periods of remote learning. As schools are aware, there is also a legal minimum requirement in regard to school days of operation.

48. It is also noted that as set out in DE Circular 2020/08 [Attendance Circular](#), study leave should only be granted for pupils undertaking qualifications or public examinations and **not** for pupils taking internal school examinations.

49. A very small number of children may be advised by their clinical team not to attend school. Where a child has been medically advised by a consultant not to attend school during 2021/22, schools should consult with parents and, as required, the Education Authority regarding education provision for these pupils.