

INTO Submission

Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications

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Submission on behalf of the INTO

To the National Council for Curriculum and
Assessment

On the Draft Primary Curriculum
Specifications for

Arts Education

Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) in the Primary Language
Curriculum

Social and Environmental Education (SEE)

Science, Technology and Engineering Education (STE) and
Wellbeing

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Introduction

The INTO wishes to thank the NCCA for the opportunity to present the views of our members on the draft specifications for the redeveloped primary curriculum. The importance of teacher involvement throughout this process cannot be understated. Teachers provide a real-life perspective, ensuring that the curriculum not only addresses academic outcomes but also considers the practical realities of everyday classroom life. Teachers and school leaders' firsthand experiences will ensure the realisation of a curriculum that will be adaptable and responsive to the needs of all pupils throughout its lifecycle.

Irish primary schools have witnessed profound transformations since the last major curriculum change in 1999. The educational landscape has shifted significantly, influenced by advancements in educational best practices, pedagogical methods, and assessment techniques. Concurrently, societal changes such as evolving individual and family identities and experiences, the increasing diversity and unique needs of our pupils, and rapid technological advancements deeply influence the learning within our primary schools. These shifts are evident in our classrooms, where modern teaching and learning methods no longer fully align with the 1999 Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999). The cumulative effect of these changes is the need for a curriculum that not only reflects modern educational theories and practices but also embraces the rich diversity and complexity of our modern society.

The process of redeveloping the primary curriculum provides our education system with the opportunity to adapt to the ever-evolving demands of our society and to meet the diverse needs of all our primary school pupils. The redevelopment of the primary school curriculum is not just an update, but a comprehensive overhaul intended to better prepare our children for the complexities of the modern world and to bring the curriculum into line with what is happening in our primary classrooms. This INTO submission lays out the collective opinions and concerns of our members, gathered through our engagement with them via online and face-to-face district consultations and an online written questionnaire. These member engagements capture our members current observations and thoughts in relation to the five draft specifications and the practical supports they need to support the implementation of the redeveloped curriculum in their classrooms and schools.

Alongside this feedback, recent world events have demonstrated how global crises can drastically affect educational systems. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, profoundly disrupted traditional education delivery and demonstrated the need for our curriculum to be both adaptable and resilient. Such events highlight the need for a curriculum that can swiftly respond to short-term global challenges, whether they are pandemics, wars, or other crises. It is crucial that our curriculum lays a foundation that not only addresses the immediate needs of our pupils but also equips them with the skills and knowledge to navigate and adapt to unforeseen global events. This will ensure that our education system remains relevant and robust, capable of supporting our pupils in this rapidly changing world.

Despite the positive steps towards involving teachers in the consultation process for the new curriculum, there are concerns regarding the speed at which curriculum change seems to be happening and the breath of new content that is being introduced across the curriculum specifications. This has led to feelings of frustration and uncertainty which could undermine the implementation of the new curriculum if not addressed. Teachers have expressed the need for a gradual approach to curriculum change, one that includes comprehensive discussions about the rationale for changes and more transparent communication about implementation timelines and expectations.

Teacher's experiences of implementing the primary language curriculum and the primary maths curriculum have also provided valuable lessons. Teachers have stressed the importance of clear communication and adequate face-to-face CPD during the rollout of the redeveloped curriculum to ensure they are well-equipped to meet its demands. Additionally, the feedback highlights a persistent concern regarding the workload and resource implications of the new curriculum, with teachers



advocating for adequate support in terms of material resources to effectively implement the new curriculum.

In this evolution of the primary curriculum, it is important that it reflects the diverse spectrum of pupils' needs within our classrooms. This includes addressing the unique educational requirements of children with additional needs, EAL learners, migrant children, those arriving from war-torn regions and children who are victims of homelessness. The success of the new curriculum will not only lie in its vision and content being fully integrated into our schools but also on the availability of support systems that ensure schools and families can provide their children with the best education possible. To ensure equitable access for all pupils to all the new curriculum specifications, there must be a concerted effort to support schools and families with adequate therapeutic and social services and resources. These are essential for all children to avail themselves of the same education opportunities across the national primary school system. Such supports will ensure that every child can fully participate in and benefit from the redeveloped curriculum, allowing for a truly inclusive educational experience.

The INTO recognises the substantial effort made by the NCCA in facilitating this extensive consultation process. However, as this submission will elaborate, there remains a need for ongoing dialogue, clearer communication, and a measured approach to implementing curriculum changes. Our goal is to ensure that the Redeveloped Primary Curriculum not only meets the educational needs of our children but also enhances the professional lives of those tasked with delivering it. This submission will further outline the specific feedback from our members and offer constructive recommendations to strengthen the curriculum and its implementation.

Section 1 Primary Curriculum Framework

Learning Outcomes

A learning outcomes approach represents a significant shift in curriculum design from the 1999 Curriculum, which will require substantial support for teachers. Implementing any curriculum model that relies heavily on teacher judgement is demanding and challenging (Stenhouse, 1975). The INTO stresses the need for ample time, support, and professional development to help teachers adapt to this new approach. Learning outcomes will naturally differ from school to school and class to class, placing teachers in the best position to use their professional judgement in making educational decisions, but only if they have a deep understanding of how to manage a learning outcomes-based curriculum.

Learning outcomes are often presented as instruments to solve problems of transparency, quality, accountability, and efficiency – as they provide precision and avoid overlaps/repetition in learning (Souto-Otero, 2012). They are also seen to aid equality as they replace the traditional emphasis on equality of access with equality of outcomes, promote learner-centred education and help teachers to better organise curriculum content. However, the approach also attracts criticism and prompts debate among teachers with some literature arguing that learning outcomes can hinder useful learning processes, inhibit explorative and unintended learning, and create a target-led culture (Goss, 2022; Li et al., 2020).

Broad learning outcomes offer positive opportunities in terms of teacher agency, enabling them to cater for and modify learning for their own class or group of children. However, when learning outcomes are overly broad, they can be vague and unclear. For example, a learning outcome for Stage 2 in the STE specification states that pupils should ‘Build on their understanding of digital tools to explore how they operate according to precise instructions; plan and create a program using a step-by-step process (algorithm); adjust and modify steps when required.’. This learning outcome provides teachers with insufficient detail of the learning experiences they should create, or what content to teach, therefore, teachers will require clarification and guidance on where they can go for further detail. INTO members feel strongly that this learning outcomes approach must be balanced with the need for some degree of clarity and definition, while recognising that teachers are often working in demanding and complex environments with an over-loaded curriculum, super-sized classes, and multi-class settings.

Recommendations

- Provide sustained face to face PD to help teachers adapt to this curriculum’s learning outcomes approach.
- Develop comprehensive toolkits for each curriculum specification to guide teachers in implementing the redeveloped curriculum. Provide clear, detailed guidance on how to achieve broad learning outcomes, including examples of effective learning experiences and assessment strategies.
- Allocate non-contact planning time within the school schedule to allow teachers to effectively incorporate learning outcomes into their teaching practices. This should be supported with substitute cover.
- Provide, within this non-contact time, opportunities for teacher collaborations to share best practices and support each other in adapting to curriculum changes.

Address curriculum overload by ensuring the number of learning outcomes and associated tasks are manageable within schools’ weekly/monthly time allocations.



Planning in the Redeveloped Curriculum

Embracing the concept of teachers as agentic professionals, as outlined in the *Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF)* (NCCA, 2023), necessitates an approach to planning that empowers teachers to make informed decisions based on their professional judgment. The "Preparation for Teaching and Learning" (PTL) (Government of Ireland, 2021) guidance document aligns with the principles and vision of the framework. The PTL places value on all types of teacher preparation—visible, invisible, and recorded—in creating meaningful lessons. This validation of the various forms of teacher preparation promotes a more flexible planning approach, allowing teachers to draw on their knowledge of their pupils, the curriculum, and effective pedagogical methods.

However, challenges remain, particularly concerning the expectations of the Inspectorate and school management. Teachers are concerned that the positive and flexible approach to planning promoted in the PTL may not align with the expectations of inspectors and school leaders, who might lack awareness or hold different perspectives on the PTL guidance. To mitigate this, ongoing and sustained communication, and professional development, made available by the Inspectorate, is essential to support the PTL's practical implementation. This would help build a collective understanding that respects teachers' professional judgment and reduces the perceived disconnect between the PTL and inspector/school leader expectations.

Teachers have, and continue to, express a need for practical supports to navigate this shift in preparation for teaching and learning. Sample templates and collaborative planning tools, developed with the Inspectorate, can provide valuable scaffolding. These tools should be designed to streamline documentation, ensuring that preparation remains practical and not overly burdensome, while allowing teachers to focus more on delivering quality learning experiences.

The INTO believes that the planning methods outlined in the PTL and incorporated in the PCF offer a path towards flexible, teacher-driven planning. However, robust support must be provided, with input from the Inspectorate, to ensure its successful implementation. By prioritising practical, teacher-friendly tools and fostering a culture of trust in teachers' expertise, primary schools can significantly enhance teaching and learning for all pupils.

Recommendations

- Promote a culture within schools and the Inspectorate that values and respects teachers' professional judgment and expertise.
- Establish a communication strategy to ensure that all teachers, school leaders, and inspectors build a common understanding of the PTL that respects teachers' professional judgment.
- Develop practical, collaborative planning tools in consultation with the Inspectorate. These tools should be designed to simplify planning documents, making it practical and less time-consuming.
- Ensure that all support materials are available as Gaeilge.
- Organise regular professional development focused on the PTL guidance and its practical application for all teachers including those returning from teaching abroad and NQTs.

Supporting SEN/AEN Learners in the Primary Curriculum Framework

The PCF highlights the importance of inclusive education and diversity, which supports equity of opportunity and participation for all children by acknowledging their unique circumstances and needs. It highlights the importance of building on children’s prior learning and experiences, offering flexibility and choice to support their holistic development.

The redeveloped primary curriculum must address the needs of children with special and additional educational needs (SEN). Early intervention is crucial, as delaying until junior infants can result in the loss of critical developmental time (McGough et al., 2006). Therefore, early assessments by multidisciplinary teams are essential. These assessments should be readily available in early years settings to enable timely interventions that can significantly improve educational outcomes for children with SEN. Transitions and continuity in children’s learning are a vital component in supporting all children and the establishment of protocols around the transfer of information and resources are necessary to ensure successful transitions between early years and primary education.

The Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science report on Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023) highlighted the urgency of establishing a national mental health programme for children and young people, with on-site mental health supports in schools being a key recommendation. The INTO calls for the nationwide rollout of the on-site counselling pilot scheme and age-appropriate mental health supports to be funded for all children to support the vision of the PCF. To achieve this, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) should be augmented, the in-school and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project should be reinstated and expanded and funding for the School Completion Programme increased. Additionally, it is vital that a grant be provided per pupil for school-based mental health supports, such as on-site counselling services, from September 2024.

Schools and school leaders cannot continue to be tasked with the administrative load being requested by NCSE, NEPS, TESS, etc., in the provision of supports to pupils. These support services must handle the logistical and administrative side of their supports and ensure it does not continuously fall to principals. Principals are prepared to work with the support services but want and need support in managing the programmes these services bring to the school.

The professional development of teachers is another vital component. Initial teacher education now includes modules on inclusive education, but ongoing professional development is necessary to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge required to support SEN pupils effectively. This includes opportunities for teachers to engage in CPD and to gain firsthand experience in special education settings.

Addressing physical aggression in schools is paramount. Teachers frequently encounter physical aggression, often from children with additional needs who struggle to communicate or regulate their emotions effectively within an inadequately supported system. The government’s interventions to date, fall short of addressing the comprehensive needs of our effected members. The INTO report on physical aggression highlights that aggression is not an exception but a daily reality in many of our special classes and special schools. Teacher’s report sustaining serious injuries, such as broken fingers and severe bites, which require immediate and long-term medical attention. The emotional and psychological toll on teachers is profound, with many feeling unsupported and vulnerable. It is unacceptable that the health and safety of our teachers is compromised due to systemic failures. The government must provide clear guidelines on managing aggressive behaviour and ensure that schools have the resources to implement these guidelines effectively. Professional development and training in crisis prevention and intervention should be provided to all schools, with the necessary funding and resources allocated to support this. The Department of education must ensure the availability of



calming environments like quiet rooms, sensory spaces, and nurturing rooms in all schools for children who require them.

Only by addressing these needs and implementing the recommendations provided, can the redevelopment of the primary curriculum better support children with special and additional educational needs, ensuring they receive the education and care they deserve. The government's interventions must go beyond pilot schemes and piecemeal measures, adopting a holistic approach that includes significant investment in mental health services, a restructuring of support systems within schools, and a society-wide commitment to valuing and supporting the physical and mental health of our teachers and pupils.

Recommendations

- Ensure ongoing face-to-face CPD for teachers, focusing on inclusive education and special educational needs. Provide opportunities for student teachers to gain experience in special education settings.
- Commence with the nationwide rollout of the on-site counselling pilot scheme and fund age-appropriate mental health supports for all children to support the vision of the PCF.
- Increase funding and resources for NEPS to provide comprehensive psychological support for all pupils.
- Reinstate and expand the in-school and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project to ensure early intervention and support for children with SEN.
- Increase funding for the School Completion Programme to support pupils at risk of dropping out.
- Ensure that early assessments by multidisciplinary teams are readily available in early years settings to enable timely interventions that can significantly improve educational outcomes for children with SEN.
- Establish protocols around the transfer of information and resources to ensure successful transitions between early years and primary education for all children.
- Provide information on the Universal Design for Learning Pilot on an ongoing basis, particularly around its benefits to children with SEN/AEN.
- Release the guidelines for managing behaviours of concern to schools. Provide professional development and training in crisis prevention and intervention, and ensure schools have the resources to implement these guidelines effectively.

Teacher and Child Agency as part of the Primary Curriculum Framework.

Agency, both for teachers and children, is a cornerstone of the PCF. This concept encompasses the capacity to act independently, make informed choices, and influence one's own learning and teaching environment (Cong-Lem, 2021). For teachers, this means making professional decisions based on their pupils' needs and interests, while for children, it involves taking active roles in their learning.

An agentic teacher is one who makes professional and informed decisions in response to their pupils' learning needs. This involves utilising their skills, knowledge, and professional judgement to create

learning experiences that are engaging, relevant, and responsive. Teacher agency is shaped by both professional and personal experiences, suggesting that the development of agency is a continuous process that involves reflective practice and professional development (Kneyber, 2016). This reflective engagement is critical for teachers to adapt their teaching strategies to the diverse needs of their pupils.

Child agency refers to the ability of children to act independently, make choices, and influence their own learning. The curriculum framework notes the importance of providing opportunities for decision-making, creativity, and collaboration. It recognises that children are capable of more than passive learning of knowledge but can actively engage with and shape their learning experiences. Children's agency is nurtured through interactions with adults who provide them with the necessary support, information, and opportunities to express their views and make informed decisions (Oswell, 2012).

Embedding the ideas of teacher and child agency into the redeveloped curriculum will require some consideration. Teachers need to be provided with CPD opportunities that provide examples of agentic and reflective practice. By creating a supportive environment for both teachers and pupils, the curriculum can ensure that agency is a lived experience in the classroom.

Recommendations

- Provide face-to-face CPD focused on fostering teacher agency which includes practical examples of agentic and reflective practice.
- Engage parents and the wider community in supporting children's agency.

Transitions and Alignment with Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and the Framework for Junior Cycle

The NCCA's work on *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, and the *Framework for Junior Cycle* shows that a well-integrated education continuum that emphasises holistic development, inclusivity, and the development of lifelong learning skills is a key priority for the organisation. Each framework aims for the continuity of learning experiences for pupils and an understanding that one must support the other in a pupil's learning journey.

Aistear, the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, and the *Framework for Junior Cycle* each embody a vision that values holistic development, inclusivity, and active participation in learning. *Aistear* views babies, toddlers, and young children as competent and agentic learners, presenting the importance of respectful, loving relationships, and the role of play in learning. It promotes a vision of early childhood as a time of being, enjoying, and learning from experiences, laying important foundations for later learning. Continuing, the PCF builds on this vision, aiming to provide a strong foundation for every child to thrive and flourish. It recognises children as unique, competent, and caring individuals and teachers as committed, skilful professionals who provide high-quality learning and teaching that is inclusive and evidence-based, ensuring all children make progress across all areas of their learning and development. Lastly, the Framework for Junior Cycle maintains this vision by supporting pupils' holistic development through a focus on key skills and competencies that prepare them for further education and life.

Alongside this, the learning structures outlined in each framework align closely, providing continuity in children's learning journeys. *Aistear*'s themes—Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking—serve as the foundation for its principles and goals. These themes are designed to promote holistic development through playful, inquiry-based learning experiences. The PCF extends these themes into seven key competencies: Being Well, Being Creative, Being a Communicator, Being



Mathematical, Being Digital, Being an Active Learner, and Being an Active Citizen. These competencies build on the capabilities developed in early childhood and show the interconnected nature of learning experiences and the importance of developing skills that are applicable across various contexts and stages of education. The Framework for Junior Cycle continues to develop these competencies, ensuring that pupils build on their earlier. Key skills in the Junior Cycle include managing information and thinking, being literate and numerate, staying well, being creative, working with others, and communicating effectively.

However, a potential tension lies in the differing pedagogical approaches used in each framework. Aistear advocates for a slow relational pedagogy, where the educator's role is to be attentive and responsive to each child's needs and interests. In contrast, primary and post-primary education often require teachers to balance individualised attention with the demands of a broader curriculum and large class sizes. This can create a tension between the need for personalised learning experiences and the practicalities of delivering a comprehensive educational program to larger groups of pupils.

Finally, the alignment between the PCF and the Framework for Junior Cycle can be effectively implemented given that both are part of the national education system where their structures facilitate better transitions and ensure that teachers can collaborate effectively to support continuous learning and development for all pupils. However, the privatisation of the early years sector presents a significant challenge to this cohesion (Murphy, 2015). The lack of a nationally managed early childhood education system undermines the efforts of the NCCA to create a seamless educational journey from early years through to post-primary education. The disparities in quality, access, and pedagogical approaches in the privatised early years sector may not support smooth transitions to primary level. This fragmentation hampers the ability of early years teachers to align their practices with the PCF and JCT, resulting in inconsistencies in children's educational experiences. In the national interest, the government must act decisively to align all stages of education by bringing the early years sector into the fold of the national education system. Such an alignment would ensure that all children benefit from a coherent, high-quality educational pathway that supports their holistic development and prepares them for lifelong learning.

Recommendations

- Invest in face-to-face CPD that promotes joint training and collaboration among early childhood, primary, and post-primary sectors.
- Create professional learning communities to share best practices, align pedagogical approaches, and support professional growth.
- Bring early childhood education under national management to provide a seamless and high-quality education for all pupils from early years through to primary and on to post-primary education.

Play in the Redeveloped Curriculum

In the context of the PCF, play and playfulness are recognised as vital elements of a child's educational journey. Play is seen as a fundamental aspect of learning that supports cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Play in the primary curriculum is structured as child-led play, teacher-led playful activities, and collaborative play between teachers and pupils. This structure allows for flexibility and responsiveness to children's emerging interests and learning needs, fostering an environment where unexpected learning opportunities can thrive. According to the PCF, these play-based approaches are

instrumental in promoting children's agency and responsibility for their learning, as they encourage independence and decision-making.

The framework advocates for extended periods of play at all class levels, alongside a supportive atmosphere to maximise the benefits of play. Teachers are encouraged to create diverse and engaging learning spaces that reflect children's interests, promoting a sense of ownership and engagement in their education.

Research supports the centrality of play in the curriculum, highlighting its role in developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and social skills. A review by Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) stresses the positive impact of play on children's holistic development and the necessity of integrating various play types to support a range of skills, including academic learning. However, studies like those by Gray and Ryan (2016) and Hunter and Walsh (2014) highlight the challenges of implementing play-based learning, noting that while teachers generally value play, they face obstacles such as time constraints, lack of resources, and insufficient training.

Despite the recognition of play's benefits, the INTO survey on playful pedagogy awareness indicates that teachers feel playful pedagogy decreases as children progress through primary school. This shift often begins as early as first class, driven by curriculum pressures and a perceived need for more traditional, measurable learning outcomes. Teachers report that play is more common in infant classrooms, with a noticeable decline in its use in senior classes, where curriculum demands take precedence.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including targeted professional development, adequate resourcing, and a shift in school culture to value play across all class levels. The INTO survey highlights the need for explicit training in playful pedagogy, as only 25% of teachers reported having received such training. This gap presents an opportunity for support services to prioritise CPD that equips teachers with the skills and confidence to integrate play into their teaching practices.

Recommendations

- Provide comprehensive face-to-face CPD for teachers that focuses on the implementation of playful pedagogy. This CPD should include practical examples, and continuous support to help teachers integrate play into their teaching practices.
- Ensure that schools have the necessary materials and resources to support play-based learning.
- Schools should be supported to cultivate a culture that values and integrates playfulness into their classrooms by promoting the benefits of play to teachers and parents.

Assessment in the Redeveloped Curriculum

The PCF and the DE's Preparation for Teaching and Learning (PTL) both present innovative approaches to assessment in primary and special schools. The PCF puts forward a broad vision of inclusive and meaningful assessment practices, promoting the principles of equity, engagement, and progression. It highlights the importance of considering diverse learning contexts and integrating various forms of assessment to support children's holistic development. The PCF introduces a continuum of assessment practices, ranging from intuitive assessments that occur spontaneously and informally, to planned



interactions that involve structured observations and dialogues, culminating in formal assessment events like tests and quizzes.

The PTL complements this framework by providing practical guidance on implementing these assessment principles in everyday teaching. It encourages teachers to utilise a wide array of assessment methods, ensuring a balance between child-led and teacher-led approaches. The document also advocates for assessments to be flexible and responsive, allowing teachers to adapt their methods based on the evolving needs and interests of their pupils.

Both documents align in their promotion of inclusive and holistic assessment practices. They stress the importance of understanding each child's unique learning journey and adapting assessments to reflect this diversity. This alignment ensures that assessments are not merely tools for measuring academic achievement but are integral to fostering an engaging and supportive learning environment. The use of varied assessment methods promotes a deeper understanding of each pupil's strengths and areas for improvement, facilitating more targeted and effective teaching supports.

Implementing these assessment methods presents several challenges for teachers. The need to use a wide range of assessment techniques will be time-consuming and will significantly increase their workload. To use these methods effectively, teachers will require ongoing professional development and support to become proficient in various assessment techniques and their integration into teaching. Additionally, maintaining comprehensive records of diverse assessments demands extensive record-keeping, which can be burdensome. Therefore, streamlined and user-friendly record-keeping systems are essential to manage the large volume of information collected and ensure the workload remains manageable for teachers.

While the INTO recognises that the assessment strategies outlined in the PCF and the PTL offer numerous benefits, including a more inclusive, responsive, and holistic approach to student evaluation, they also require careful consideration of the practical challenges they present. Addressing these challenges will be crucial in ensuring these assessment practices are embedded successfully as part of the redeveloped curriculum.

Recommendations

- Provide comprehensive training focused on the assessment methods found in the various *Primary Curriculum Framework* Specifications.
- Ensure any systems introduced to support record keeping reduces the administrative burdens associated with the assessments presented across the different specifications.

Time Allocation

Teachers generally view the flexibility in time allocations proposed in the PCF positively. This flexibility is seen as an opportunity to tailor their timetables to the needs of their pupils and to engage more with project-based learning. However, the introduction of new subjects, particularly modern foreign languages, has raised concerns about managing the already overcrowded curriculum within the existing school week. Many teachers feel that the curriculum is currently overloaded, and adding new subject areas will make it difficult to cover all required curriculum content.

The primary issue arising from the flexible time allocations is the need to shift time between subjects to accommodate new ones. This reallocation is being viewed by teachers as a reduction in time for the

core subjects of literacy and maths. Teachers are concerned that without careful planning and support, the quality of education in these core subjects could be affected.

The concept of the integrated curriculum is key to addressing the challenges associated with time allocation. By integrating subjects, teachers can create cross-curricular lessons that cover multiple areas of the curriculum simultaneously. Teachers need comprehensive PD to navigate the flexibility in time allocations and to implement an integrated curriculum effectively. This PD should demonstrate how integrating different subjects can create efficiencies, making it possible to cover the curriculum without overburdening teachers or pupils. This approach also requires adequate resources and materials be provided to support integrated teaching methods, ensuring that teachers are well-equipped to make the most of time allocations.

Recommendations

- Provide training that focuses on implementing an integrated curriculum within the *primary curriculum frameworks* time allocations.
- Provide sufficient resources, including teaching materials and technological tools, to support the integrated curriculum.

Digital Learning

The INTO supports integrating digital technology across all curricular areas, rather than teaching it as a standalone subject. This method better meets pupils' digital learning needs and acknowledges that technology is woven throughout all parts of children's lives (Feerick et al., 2022). Many teachers have observed the positive impact of technology in enhancing teaching and learning and capturing pupils' attention. However, concerns remain around the availability of digital resources in schools, teachers' skill levels, and a perceived over-reliance on technology. The Covid-19 school closures also highlighted the "digital divide," faced by many of our pupils who lacked devices and access to technology in their homes.

Inconsistencies in resources and equipment at school level, coupled with varying broadband quality, affect digital technology engagement. Respondents to the INTO Survey on Remote Learning called for increased investment in digital technology and continuous professional development for teachers. Research has also showed that nearly one-third of the world's young people are already digitally excluded (Ayllón et al., 2023), and school closures exacerbated this divide. Addressing this divide requires proper funding and support to close the gap for all learners.

At the primary level, the curriculum should reflect societal changes, equipping pupils with necessary ICT skills to navigate confidently and safely an ever-evolving digital world. Digital literacy enables access to a broad range of media but is not fully understood in schools (Feerick et al., 2022). Further study is needed to understand the implications of developing and implementing digital literacy strategies in the Irish context. Skills needed in education today are much broader than those required ten years ago, making it essential to explore digital literacy to support teaching and learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of digital literacy for both teachers and pupils, revealing the unpreparedness of school systems for digital learning. This period also exposed further inequalities, particularly in access to expertise, training, broadband, and ICT infrastructure. A strategic priority for the Department of Education must be equal access to digital learning for all pupils through



investment in infrastructure, professional development, technical support, and high-speed broadband in all Irish primary schools.

Assistive technology (AT) has significantly improved learning for children with special educational needs, enhancing their access to the curriculum. The Department of Education funds schools to purchase equipment for pupils with physical or communicative needs. This aligns with the idea of agency in the PCF by providing alternative ways for pupils to access teaching and learning. The INTO believes increased access to AT is crucial for inclusion and calls for extended funding for AT across the primary sector throughout the rollout of the redeveloped primary curriculum.

Parents also need education on internet dangers and online safety. Social media bullying remains a large concern for teachers and principals, who often find themselves dealing with issues in the classroom which have occurred outside school on children's private devices. Parents must be educated through a nationwide campaign on safe internet usage to safeguard their children and take responsibility for their exposure to online content. The INTO believes children's safe engagement with technology requires both pupils and parents to be trained in cyber safety.

The goal of digital technology in education is to make ICT an integral part of teaching, learning, and assessment in every classroom, embedded across all curriculum areas. Teachers welcome the inclusion of 'being a digital learner' as a key competency within the PCF, aligning with approaches in other European countries. To achieve this, all schools must be provided with well-equipped, fully resourced learning environments with digitally competent and confident teachers. Without these foundational elements, building digital knowledge and skills is unachievable.

Recommendations

- Ensure equal access to digital learning by investing in infrastructure, professional development, technical support, and high-speed broadband for all schools.
- Provide continuous professional development for teachers to improve their digital literacy and skills.
- Increase funding for AT to support children with special educational needs, ensuring inclusivity in digital learning.
- Develop digital content both in English and as Gaeilge to support the redeveloped primary curriculum and meet the diverse needs of pupils in Irish primary schools.
- Implement nationwide campaigns to educate parents on internet dangers and online safety to protect children from cyberbullying and inappropriate content.
- Ensure all schools are well-equipped with the necessary digital devices and resources to support teaching and learning.
- Conduct further research on developing and implementing digital literacy strategies tailored to the Irish context.

Education for Sustainable Development

The inclusion of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the primary curriculum is pivotal in addressing the urgent sustainability challenges of our times. Despite its recognition in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* by NCCA, there remains a critical need to integrate ESD more effectively across all areas of the curriculum. The fragmented approach to ESD, with it being mainly embedded in the SEE specification, limits the potential for comprehensive engagement with sustainable practices across the other subject areas. It is important that ESD is not merely appended to existing subjects but woven throughout, enabling a holistic development of sustainable mindsets from an early age.

For this integration to be effective, substantial support must be provided in terms of CPD for teachers, sufficient implementation time for the underlying pedagogies and philosophy of ESD, and adequate resources. Face-to-face CPD specific to ESD is crucial. Teachers need to be equipped with the latest pedagogical strategies and content knowledge to effectively deliver integrated lessons that not only convey information but also empower pupils to take action for a sustainable future.

The integration of ESD into the redeveloped curriculum demands thoughtful planning to avoid curriculum overload. A practical solution lies in weaving ESD outcomes into the learning objectives of all subjects, thereby enriching rather than burdening the curriculum. This approach ensures that sustainability becomes a lens through which students view all aspects of their learning, fostering a comprehensive educational experience.

Additionally, the infrastructure within schools must reflect and support sustainable practices. The INTO again calls for the retrofitting of older school buildings with energy efficient systems and sustainable design in new constructions. This infrastructure will act as a practical example of sustainability in action but also enhance the learning environment for pupils, making the school a model of environmental sustainability.

To ensure that schools and teachers are fully prepared to implement this broadened scope of ESD, the Department of Education must also provide the necessary funding and resources. This includes both physical materials and digital resources. The integration of outdoor learning environments, as suggested by the INTO, can provide hands-on experiences that are invaluable for instilling a genuine appreciation and understanding of environmental and social sustainability.

The ambition to weave ESD throughout the curriculum requires a coordinated approach at all levels of the education system. This includes policy support from the Department of Education, leadership supports within schools, and active engagement from the community. To facilitate this, the Department of Education should consider establishing a dedicated team to support ESD initiatives, ensuring that these are not only implemented but also continuously evaluated and improved upon.

While the NCCA has laid a solid foundation for the inclusion of ESD in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, there remains a significant need to expand ESD across all curricular areas. The support provided must be strategically linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring that all educational initiatives align with these benchmarks. With targeted face-to-face CPD, adequate resources, and a supportive infrastructure, teachers can be empowered to develop the next generation of environmentally conscious citizens. This holistic approach not only enhances pupils' understanding of sustainability but also equips them with the skills and values necessary to lead and support sustainable development globally. By aligning educational supports with the SDGs, we ensure that the curriculum not only addresses local educational needs but also contributes to global sustainability objectives.



Recommendations

- Ensure Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is purposefully and visibly woven throughout all specifications rather than being confined to specific specifications by embedding ESD outcomes in learning objectives across the curriculum, making sustainability one of the central lenses through which all subjects are taught.
- Provide face-to-face CPD specifically focused on ESD, equipping teachers with the latest pedagogical strategies and content knowledge to effectively deliver integrated lessons that promote sustainability.
- Retrofit older school buildings with energy efficient systems and incorporate sustainable design in new constructions.
- Ensure the allocation of sufficient funding and resources, including physical materials and digital toolkits, to support the integration of ESD across specifications.
- Establish a dedicated team within the Department of Education to support and oversee ESD initiatives. Ensure policies align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and foster a coordinated approach to sustainability education across all levels of the education system.

Section 2: Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications

Arts Education

The redeveloped arts specification represents a significant step towards creating an arts education that aligns with contemporary educational needs and societal changes. INTO members have expressed a positive outlook on the draft specification, acknowledging its potential to enhance the creative and expressive capacities of pupils. The feedback from INTO members highlights a strong appreciation for the expanded scope of the arts specification, which now includes media arts and dance, alongside the traditional disciplines of visual arts, music, and drama. This broader inclusion is seen as a good change, offering pupils a richer array of creative experiences. The specification's user-friendly structure and clear learning progression are also commended, with specific praise for the concrete improvements in the drama component.

However, concerns remain, particularly regarding the forced integration of arts subjects, which some members feel is inadequately supported by the current framework. There is a consensus that the specification should allow for more natural and flexible integration, respecting the unique qualities and educational value of each arts discipline. Additionally, there is a need for greater clarity and support concerning culturally responsive pedagogy and sensory accommodations for pupils with specific needs across the Arts subject areas.

A recurring theme in the feedback is the necessity of robust CPD to build teacher confidence and competence in delivering the arts specification effectively. Teachers are calling for full-day in-service training, particularly in the arts, over webinars to develop understanding and practice hands-on practical skills. Members are also insisting that schools be provided with adequate resources and materials, which should be regularly replenished through a central fund. Additionally, they request samples of integrated arts lessons to be made available through the specification toolkit.

It was also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted arts education, as teachers had to adapt to remote learning environments, at the expense of hands-on, collaborative artistic experiences. INTO members report that during the pandemic, other subjects were prioritised over arts subjects, leading to a reduction in creative opportunities for pupils. Members are now looking to reinvigorate and prioritise arts education and see the redeveloped curriculum as a key moment for the arts to reestablish their role in fostering creativity, cultural awareness, and holistic development in children.

Class Size, Classroom Space, and Classroom Organisation

Current class sizes do not adequately support pupils' creativity due to overcrowded conditions. Members feel that large class sizes lead to a diluted focus on each student's creative development and force a generalised approach rather than tailored instruction in the arts. The physical constraints of a typical classroom are also a major issue, with many classrooms being too small to support the arts as presented in the specification. Traditional classroom layouts, such as rows of desks facing the teacher, further limit the flexibility required to provide a dynamic arts education.

Effective classroom organisation in arts education necessitates rethinking traditional layouts. According to the draft primary arts education specification, creating spaces that facilitate movement, sensory engagement, and access to diverse materials can significantly enhance the learning experience. Inadequate classroom space and organisation are likely to severely restrict the practical application of arts education.



Given these challenges, it is crucial to address the issue of funding. The INTO calls for an increase in capitation funding and the minor works grant to ensure that schools have the necessary resources and infrastructure to provide the support needed to create learning environments that truly foster creativity and exploration in arts education.

Planning and Professional Support

The broadness of the arts specification demands a thoughtful and well-structured approach to planning and instruction. Planning in arts education involves designing lessons that are engaging, educational, and flexible. The draft arts specification calls for planning that includes clear learning outcomes, diverse instructional strategies, and appropriate assessment methods. This extensive planning can be overwhelming, particularly given the broad range of areas in the arts specification. The INTO would be concerned about the increased workload this may impose on teachers.

With this, teachers are also tasked with creating lesson plans that allow for exploration and experimentation while ensuring that learning outcomes are met. This requires a deep understanding of both artistic processes and the pedagogical methods that support them. Teachers who lack confidence or experience in different areas of the arts specification may find this balance particularly challenging and will need comprehensive training to support them. Managing time for the equal delivery of visual arts, drama, and music will also be a significant challenge.

Professional development is critical in supporting teachers to develop effective planning and teaching methods. CPD opportunities must be provided to help teachers stay updated with the latest pedagogical strategies and gain confidence in their ability to teach the arts. It is important to prioritise the provision of high-quality exemplars and practical strategies that teachers can apply in their classrooms.

Resources for Arts Education

The availability of resources will determine the successful implementation of the arts specification. Resources in this context include not only physical materials and equipment but also access to external expertise. Arts education becomes significantly more challenging without essential resources. Schools are currently managing very limited budgets, which restrict the range and quality of materials available to pupils. Inadequate resourcing will stifle creativity and limit the scope of arts projects that teachers and pupils can do.

Access to external expertise, such as visiting artists, musicians, and drama practitioners, can enrich the arts education experience. Partnerships with cultural organisations and community artists provide pupils with exposure to professional practices and new techniques. Establishing and maintaining these partnerships will require its own level of funding and support. The INTO would insist that these partnerships be funded by a Department of Education fund, allocated to all schools, ensuring that schools are not asked to bear the costs of these valuable collaborations.

The INTO would insist that these partnerships, be funded by a Department of Education fund, allocated to all schools, ensuring that schools are not asked to bear the costs of these valuable collaborations. The recent application-style funding models imposed by the Department of Education are fundamentally flawed. For example, the current “Creative Clusters Scheme” forces schools to apply and be assessed to avail of limited funding for the arts. The Department of Education must abandon this ineffective and inequitable application-style funding model in favour of a more equitable system that guarantees all pupils have access to the creative and educational benefits of a well-resourced arts education programme. The INTO calls for a general allocation of funding specifically for arts materials and resources. This approach will ensure that all schools receive the necessary financial support to provide high-quality arts education.

Lack of Confidence in the Arts

Teachers often enter the profession with varying levels of training and experience in the arts. Many primary teachers have a limited ITE education in the Arts, leading to a lack of confidence in teaching these subjects. This is particularly true for media arts, which may not have been included in their ITE programmes. As a result, teachers may feel ill-equipped to deliver these components of the arts curriculum effectively.

There is a pressing need for professional development that focuses on building teachers' skills and confidence across all art forms. Sustained CPD will help teachers stay updated with new techniques, pedagogical strategies, and developments in the arts. Providing teachers with access to high-quality exemplars and practical teaching strategies will also help them feel more confident in their teaching.

Mentoring and collaborative teaching can also effectively address this knowledge gap. Experienced teachers or teachers with a special interest in certain art forms can support less experienced colleagues, providing them with guidance. Co-teaching arrangements, where teachers work alongside each other, can provide valuable on-the-job learning experiences also.

Integrating technology into arts education can create new opportunities for teaching and learning. Online resources, instructional videos, and virtual workshops can provide teachers with additional support and ideas for their lessons. The draft arts specification highlights the potential of ICT to enhance arts education, though it acknowledges that this potential has not yet been fully realised in many classrooms. To achieve this, proper ICT resources must be available in all primary classrooms.

Recommendations

- Provide face to face, hands-on PD to build teacher confidence and competence in the delivery of the arts specification.
- Establish a central fund to regularly replenish arts materials and provide schools with adequate resources.
- Address overcrowded classrooms and infrastructural limitations to support the delivery of this specification's creative activities.
- Support schools to foster partnerships with external experts, like visiting artists and cultural bodies, to enrich the learning experience.
- Develop and provide a comprehensive toolkit with sample integrated arts lessons and practical strategies.
- Ensure arts subjects receive equal emphasis alongside core subjects to restore and enhance creative opportunities for pupils, fostering their holistic development and cultural awareness.
- Support and encourage mentoring & co-teaching arrangements to provide on-the-job learning experiences, fostering collaboration and the sharing of best practices in arts education.



Modern Foreign Languages

The INTO welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft specification for the introduction of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) into Irish primary schools in September 2025. As the only entirely new subject area in the redeveloped curriculum, MFL's integration into the *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) and not the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (PCF) raises significant concerns that must be addressed to ensure a smooth and effective implementation.

INTO members have expressed a range of views on the draft MFL specification, reflecting both optimism and concern. The inclusion of language awareness and the focus on building basic communicative competence at the pre-A1 and A1 levels are seen as relatively realistic goals. However, there are substantial concerns regarding teacher competency and the adequacy of professional development to meet these new demands. The feedback indicates a strong need for a national long-term plan that clearly outlines the teaching and learning strategies for MFL, including which languages will be available, how schools will select these languages and how the natural movement of teachers/NQTs in the school system will be managed.

Another issue highlighted by INTO members is the tension between the PLC, developed prior to the 2023 PCF, and the new MFL specification. The rushed integration of MFL into the PLC is viewed as problematic, with questions about whether these contrasting curriculums will fit together effectively. Members have highlighted that this hurried approach to add MFL to the PLC will undermine the potential benefits of MFL by not allowing sufficient time for the necessary teacher training, support structures and resources to be developed to truly embed MFL into our primary classrooms.

Several practical challenges are anticipated with the introduction of MFL. A significant concern is the development of teacher competency, especially given the high standards required to teach languages effectively. The draft specification does not adequately address the current lack of language competency among primary teachers or the research-based need for teachers to possess a high level of proficiency to teach languages effectively. It is essential to create academic pathways for teachers to upskill in languages and time for this to embed across the system. Furthermore, if the NCCA and Oide do not proactively address this issue, there is a high likelihood that private textbook companies will step in to fill the knowledge gap with their own language programmes due to insufficient support service input.

While INTO members appreciate the detail in the specification around language awareness, basic language learning and the integration of language learning across broader curriculum activities, they stress the need for detailed guidance on assessment methods and explicit inclusion of assessment strategies within the specification. The current draft's lack of clarity in this area needs to be addressed to ensure effective implementation.

The INTO believes that the introduction of MFL into the Irish primary school curriculum can enhance pupils' language learning and cultural awareness but it necessitates extremely careful planning and robust support systems. The INTO urges the NCCA to consider the detailed feedback from its members below and look to address the concerns about teacher competency, proper resourcing, realistic expectations and the need for a cohesive and easily useable integration of MFL with current PLC structures. The importance of clear communication, thorough planning, and substantial support for teachers and schools throughout the implementation process are key priorities for the INTO who remain committed to working collaboratively with all stakeholders to ensure our members can implement MFL effectively.

Tension Between the PLC and Modern Foreign Languages under the PCF

The attempt to integrate MFL into the PLC (PLC) highlights several significant differences and tensions between the two curriculums. The 2019 PLC was designed with focus on the development of English and Irish language skills across four stages, emphasising deep linguistic and cultural understanding within the national context. It promotes an integrative approach, where the existing linguistic knowledge and experiences of children are leveraged to support learning in both English and Irish. The PLC is structured to provide a gradual, immersive language learning process from the infant to the senior classes, focusing on building solid foundations in the first language (L1) and second language (L2).

The draft Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) specification adds a third language (L3) to be introduced at Stages 3 and 4. This specification shifts the focus to developing initial language awareness and basic communication skills in a new foreign language. The inclusion of MFL in this manner disrupts the continuity of the language experience intended in the PLC. The integration of an additional language learning track alongside English and Irish adds complexity and potential confusion for both teachers and pupils.

The pedagogical approaches further illustrate the disparities between the two documents. The PLC emphasises immersive, integrative language experiences that build progressively on children’s existing linguistic knowledge. It supports a deep, participatory approach to language learning that aligns with the children’s developmental stages and cognitive abilities. Starting MFL at Stage 3 requires teachers to adapt to new instructional strategies, around language awareness, that might not align seamlessly with the established practices for teaching English and Irish. This sudden shift can disrupt the flow and continuity of learning, making it challenging for pupils to adjust to a new language learning process while still mastering their L1 and L2.

Structurally, the PLC’s time allocations were not designed to accommodate the addition of MFL. The PLC was designed within a specific time allocation for language development, but incorporating MFL requires additional time that is now looking for space in an already overcrowded weekly time allocation. Schools will now need to juggle their timetables significantly as the draft MFL specification proposes time allocations that our members feel do not account for the already packed curriculum, further straining and overloading the teaching and learning for both pupils and teachers.

The pressure from the Department of Education to quickly integrate MFL into the primary curriculum is the main driver of the above issues. The NCCA is under significant pressure to adapt the PLC to include MFL without adequate time for thorough preparation or consultation with teachers and stakeholders. This rushed implementation is likely to result in poor outcomes and resistance from teachers who are unprepared for such a substantial change.

To mitigate this, the Department of Education must acknowledge that the embedding and implementation of the 2019 PLC has not been entirely successful and undertake a thorough redevelopment of the language curriculum, considering the integration of MFL from the ground up. Extensive consultations with teachers, parents, and stakeholders are essential to gather input and ensure a well-rounded approach. A phased implementation of MFL within a redeveloped language curriculum is required to allow time for developing appropriate teaching materials, training teachers, and adjusting the curriculum based on the needs of our schools. Moreover, the Department of Education must commit to providing substantial support in terms of professional development for teachers and additional resources to facilitate the integration of MFL.

The attempt to incorporate MFL into the existing PLC under the new framework is fraught with challenges. The inherent tensions between the PLC and the new MFL curriculum requirements, combined with the Department of Education’s pressure for quick implementation, risk undermining



the quality of language learning in primary schools. A fully redeveloped language curriculum is the only way to develop a coherent and effective language curriculum that truly benefits all pupils.

Recommendations

- The Department of Education must acknowledge the limited success of the 2019 PLC rollout and commit to learning from past implementation mistakes to ensure that the same issues do not affect the integration of MFL.
- A thorough ground up redevelopment of the PLC to integrate MFL should be initiated so that the language curriculum supports English, Irish, and MFL in a coherent and integrated manner, allowing for a seamless language learning experience for pupils from infants to senior classes.
- When completed the DE must implement the fully redeveloped language program in a phased manner allowing for a gradual embedding of the curriculum, providing time to develop appropriate teaching materials, train teachers, and adjust the curriculum based on feedback and observed outcomes.
- Realign curriculum time allocations to accommodate MFL without overloading teachers. The current time allocations for language were not designed to include MFL. Adjusting the timetable to ensure balanced and manageable time for all language learning activities is essential.

Teacher Competency

The Department of Education's shortsighted and poorly conceived plan to introduce MFL into the primary curriculum blatantly disregards the current lack of teacher competency in foreign languages. This demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the practical realities faced by schools trying to introduce MFL. Forcing this initiative upon teachers without providing the necessary training and resources will undermine the quality of language education while also placing undue stress on already overburdened teachers. The INTO will not stand idly by while our members are coerced or pressured into acquiring new language skills without adequate supports or the availability of opportunities to upskill. We are prepared to use all options available to us to protect our members' working conditions and wellbeing. Should the Department attempt to take advantage of teachers in their rush to implement MFL, we will respond decisively and vigorously to ensure that our members are fairly treated.

Our members have expressed serious concerns regarding their ability to effectively teach a new language without adequate training and support. As highlighted in the feedback from the INTO MFL Development Group, "Concerns around teacher competency and the level of competent language speaking teachers" are prevalent. This sentiment points to the urgent need for a national long-term plan for MFL education in primary schools, including comprehensive, front-loaded, in-service CPD.

Teacher competency is a critical determinant of the success of the MFL specification. Research consistently shows that the skill of the language teacher significantly outweighs other curricular factors in effective language teaching. For instance, Darling-Hammond (2000) and Enever (2014) highlight the link between teacher effectiveness and student achievement, stressing that content knowledge and pedagogical skill are essential for successful language instruction. This is further supported by Shulman (1987), who emphasised the importance of combining expert subject-matter knowledge with pedagogical skills to meet learners' needs.

Our members fear that without sufficient proficiency in the target languages, the teaching of MFL will mirror the challenges currently faced in teaching Irish in English-medium schools. The Chief Inspector's report (2020) revealed serious difficulties in the teaching of Irish in English medium schools, with many teachers relying heavily on textbooks and failing to provide adequate opportunities for communicative language use. This has resulted in subpar learning experiences for pupils, a situation that is likely to reoccur with MFL if teacher competency issues are not addressed. One member starkly put it, "How are we supposed to teach a language we don't know ourselves? The demands are unreasonable".

The lack of language competency will lead to a reliance on private textbook companies to fill the gap, which could result in an inconsistent implementation of MFL. The danger here is twofold in that it not only undermines the agency of teachers but also risks standardising language education in a way that may not cater to the diverse needs of pupils across different schools. To bridge the competency gap during the interim and early years of MFL implementation, specialist language teachers may be required. As a member noted, "Employ specialised language teachers to provide MFL instruction on fixed term or permanent contracts similar to shared SET, the supply panel model, or teaching principal admin days." These specialists can provide high-quality language instruction while existing primary school teachers undergo the necessary upskilling. By bringing in specialists, we can alleviate immediate pressure on current teachers, allowing them the time and space to acquire the required proficiency through state-funded opportunities.

The path to improving teacher competency must include state-funded postgraduate diplomas and master's programmes in language education, robust and sustained CPD opportunities, and practical support mechanisms such as sound files linked to all MFL exemplar pages. This approach will help ensure that teachers are not merely "one page ahead of the pupils" in their language books but are confident and competent in delivering high-quality language education. Consideration must also be given to the large number of Irish teachers likely to return from teaching abroad in the coming years, ensuring they are effectively upskilled as and when they return.

Teacher competency is the key to the successful implementation of the MFL specification. Without addressing the current gaps in knowledge and skills, the introduction of MFL risks repeating the challenges seen in the teaching of Irish, thereby failing to realise the full potential of language education in primary schools. It is essential that robust, research-based strategies are employed to upskill teachers in a way that does not, in any way, impact a principal's ability to allocate teaching resources within their schools. Principals must retain the flexibility to manage their staff in a manner that best meets the needs of their student populations. All PD should be designed to complement, not complicate, the administrative responsibilities of school leaders, thereby ensuring a smooth and effective integration of MFL into the curriculum without disrupting existing resource allocation and school operations.

Recommendations

- The Department of Education must create a comprehensive, long-term plan for MFL education in primary schools. This plan should include state-funded programmes in language education, as well as sustained face-to-face CPD opportunities.
- Immediate and extensive CPD should be provided to all teachers in MFL instruction. This includes practical supports that ensure teachers are well-prepared and confident in their ability to deliver high-quality language education.
- CPD initiatives must be designed in a way that does not impede principals' ability to allocate teaching resources within their schools. Principals must retain the flexibility to manage staff assignments to best meet the diverse needs of their student populations



without being constrained by additional administrative burdens from the implementation of MFL.

- To prevent an over-reliance on private textbook companies, the Department should ensure that all necessary teaching materials and resources for MFL are provided centrally. This approach will help maintain consistency in MFL instruction across schools.
- The Department of Education should employ specialist language teachers to provide immediate, high-quality language instruction while allowing current primary school teachers the necessary time to upskill through state-funded PD opportunities

Introduction of MFL and Early Language Learning

The decision to introduce MFL at Stage 3 of the primary curriculum rather than beginning in infant classes raises significant questions about the long-term efficacy and strategic planning for MFL by the Department of Education. Research overwhelmingly supports the benefits of starting language education at a younger age. Studies indicate that younger children have a distinct advantage in language acquisition due to their heightened neuroplasticity, which allows them to absorb new sounds, syntax, and vocabulary more naturally and efficiently than older children and adults. Birdsong and Molis (2001) as well as Hakuta, Bialystok, and Wiley (2003) highlight that early exposure to language learning leads to better pronunciation and a more native-like accent, a crucial factor for long-term proficiency. Furthermore, children who start learning languages earlier tend to achieve higher levels of grammatical proficiency and develop a deeper understanding of linguistic structures.

Introducing MFL in infant classes would leverage these cognitive advantages, creating a solid foundation for more advanced language skills in later years. The incremental decline in language learning abilities with age suggests that delaying the introduction of MFL until Stage 3 misses a critical window of opportunity. Moreover, younger children are more likely to engage with languages through playful and immersive activities, which research shows to be highly effective for language retention and enjoyment (Lew-Williams & Fernald, 2010).

The Department of Education's decision to commence MFL at Stage 3 reflects a concerning lack of understanding of these fundamental principles of language acquisition. This misstep places undue pressure on the NCCA to accommodate a curriculum framework that is not optimally aligned with best practices in language education. The NCCA has been forced to work within constraints that compromise the potential effectiveness of MFL instruction, disadvantaging pupils who might have benefitted significantly from earlier exposure.

Starting MFL at Stage 3 imposes additional challenges on teachers who are already grappling with the complexities of the current curriculum. Without early language learning experiences, pupils and teachers alike face a steeper learning curve, requiring more intensive supports to achieve the desired outcomes. This highlights the Department's shortsightedness and points to a gap in strategic planning for language education in primary schools.

Ideally, the introduction of MFL should begin in the infant classes to maximise cognitive and linguistic benefits. The current approach not only overlooks well-documented research but also imposes unnecessary challenges on teachers and pupils. The INTO calls for a reevaluation of this strategy, advocating for an evidence-based approach that aligns with the best practices in language education to ensure a more successful and enriching language learning experience for all pupils.

Recommendations

- The Department of Education, as part of a redeveloped PLC, should plan to introduce MFL starting in infant classes rather than at Stage 3.
- The NCCA should be empowered to design an MFL curriculum that reflects best practices in language education, starting from the earliest years of primary education.

Integrating New Concepts from the MFL Specification

In the draft MFL specification, teachers are presented with a lot of new terminologies and concepts deemed essential for engaging with the updated language curriculum. Among these, plurilingualism and intercultural awareness stand out as key elements, reflecting the growing recognition of linguistic diversity and cultural diversity in our nation’s classrooms today.

Plurilingualism refers to the capacity of individuals to use multiple languages to varying degrees and for different purposes. This approach encourages learners to draw upon all their linguistic resources, fostering a holistic language development process. Research highlights the cognitive, social, and academic benefits of plurilingualism, including enhanced problem-solving skills, greater cognitive flexibility, and improved metalinguistic awareness. Kirwan (2015) demonstrates that integrating pupils’ home languages into the classroom promotes a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, validating the linguistic identities of pupils and enriching the learning experience for all by exposing them to a wider range of linguistic inputs and cultural perspectives.

Intercultural awareness, closely linked to plurilingualism, involves understanding and appreciating the cultural contexts of languages. It is crucial for fostering empathy, respect, and effective communication in a multicultural world. By integrating intercultural awareness into the MFL curriculum, teachers can help pupils develop the skills necessary to navigate and thrive in diverse cultural settings. This includes recognising cultural differences, challenging stereotypes, and engaging with various cultural expressions and practices. Kirwan (2018) again notes that the benefits of this approach extend beyond language proficiency, contributing to pupils' overall personal and social development.

However, the implementation of these concepts poses significant challenges, particularly for generalist teachers who will require extensive PD to fully grasp and effectively apply them. The INTO has expressed support for the inclusion of plurilingualism and intercultural awareness in the MFL specification, acknowledging their potential to enrich language education. However, there is concern about the substantial knowledge that teachers must acquire to support pupils effectively as part of the draft specification. In addition to plurilingualism and intercultural awareness, the glossary of the draft MFL specifications includes numerous complex terms and ideas that would necessitate dedicated CPD for full understanding.

Recommendations

- Develop targeted initiatives to build teachers' understanding of the new terms and concepts introduced in the MFL specifications. This should include expanding beyond glossaries and supporting teachers with practical strategies for integrating pupils' home languages into the classroom and developing cultural sensitivity.



- Conduct regular reviews of the language curriculum to ensure it remains relevant and effective in addressing the needs of our diverse student population.

MFL and Inspectorate Support

The introduction of MFL into the primary curriculum is a significant educational reform that will require support from Department of Education inspectors. The Inspectorate will play a role in ensuring that the implementation of MFL meets the high standards expected in primary education. However, many inspectors do not possess the necessary competency in the languages that may be taught, which will affect their ability to accurately assess the quality of MFL teaching and learning. This lack of competency will necessitate inspectors allowing for a blended teaching approach when supporting MFL lessons.

A blended approach to MFL instruction involves allowing teachers to organise and introduce the lesson in their first language (L1) before transitioning to the main lesson in the chosen MFL. This method provides a scaffolded learning experience for pupils, enabling them to grasp the foundational concepts in a familiar language before applying them in a new language. This blended lesson structure harmonises the primary MFL specification with the existing MFL curriculum at post-primary level. It is essential for inspectors to understand and support this model, recognising its benefits in facilitating effective language learning at this foundation stage of introducing MFL to primary schools.

This blended approach to MFL should not interfere with the teaching of Irish, which should continue to be taught through Irish. The Irish language holds a unique position as our national language, embodying significant historical importance. It is vital that the teaching of Irish is safeguarded within the primary curriculum with the relevant education support services ensuring the CPD provided for Irish language instruction receives the highest priority in the redeveloped curriculum.

The Department of Education must provide comprehensive guidance around how inspectors will support the implementation of the MFL specification. These documents should provide clarity on how MFL lessons will be evaluated, reflecting the language competencies of both teachers and the inspectors themselves. Such guidance will ensure consistency and fairness in evaluations, fostering an environment where teachers feel supported to deliver high-quality MFL education.

Recommendations

- The Department of Education must distribute, alongside the release of the MFL specification, detailed guidance documents around support from inspectors which outline how they will evaluate MFL lessons considering their own potential language competency gaps.
- DE inspectors should support the use of blended instructional approaches where teachers introduce lessons in their first language (L1) before transitioning to the chosen MFL.
- DE inspectors should ensure that the introduction of MFL does not compromise the teaching and promotion of the Irish language. Curriculum documents and resources should clearly differentiate the instructional approaches for MFL and Irish

Assessment in MFL Specification

The MFL draft specification lacks a dedicated section on assessment, highlighting a significant gap when compared to the comprehensive detailing of assessment in the other curriculum specifications.

The PCF highlights assessment as an integral part of the learning and teaching process, involving collaboration among children, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. Assessment is seen as existing along a continuum, ranging from intuitive assessments to planned interactions and formal assessment events. This comprehensive approach ensures that assessment informs and supports progression in children’s learning across the curriculum, providing necessary feedback across all specifications.

By insisting that the NCCA overlay the assessment principles of the PLC onto the MFL specification, the Department, again, exhibits a lack of coherent strategy and depth for the future of the specification. Such an approach does a disservice to teachers and pupils alike, revealing a hasty attempt to align disparate curricula rather than a thoughtful, comprehensive integration with the PCF to truly reflect the educational objectives and pedagogical commitments of the redeveloped curriculum. To rectify this, a section on assessment must be included in the MFL specification which connects assessment strategies as to the PCF. This alignment is essential to avoid the disjointed implementation of assessment practices across the redeveloped curriculum.

Recommendations

- Develop an assessment section within the MFL specification that aligns with the principles of the PCF. This section should reflect the educational and pedagogical philosophies of the redeveloped curriculum, ensuring unified and effective assessment across specifications.

Social and Environmental Education

The draft specification for Social and Environmental Education (SEE) has garnered a mixed response from members of the INTO. Based on the feedback collected from INTO members, it is evident that while there is general support for the redeveloped SEE specification, significant concerns remain regarding its implementation and specific content areas.

Members pointed to the overall user-friendliness of the draft specification, appreciating that the curriculum is designed to be accessible and easy to navigate. Another area members have referred positively to is the emphasis on environmental sustainability, outdoor learning, and play-based methodologies. Members commend the curriculum for promoting active learning where children can engage in hands-on activities, communicate, and present their ideas. This focus on experiential learning is appreciated for fostering essential skills in pupils.

The focus on inclusivity and diversity within the curriculum is also positively acknowledged. Members appreciate the curriculum's aim to foster a culture based on human rights, democracy, equity, social and environmental justice, and sustainable development. The creation of safe and accessible learning spaces that promote empathy, respect, and multi-perspectivity is seen as a valuable part of the draft specification.

However, INTO members have pointed out potential barriers to this focus on inclusivity and diversity such as large class sizes, inadequate support staff, and insufficient resources. They emphasise the need for front-loaded PD and face-to-face training to ensure all teachers are prepared to deliver the curriculum effectively. Moreover, concerns about whether all schools have the necessary infrastructure



and resources to support the curriculum's goals and address safety issues in certain areas remain unaddressed.

While the draft specification promotes learning in various environments, including outdoor and local settings, INTO members note practical challenges such as financial constraints and safety concerns that can limit the feasibility of these activities. Ensuring that all schools, regardless of their location and resources, can implement these aspects of the curriculum is crucial.

The integration of 'Education about Religions and Beliefs' (ERB) within SEE has sparked some debate. Some members stress that teaching ERB under the umbrella of history and geography could lead to potential biases and misrecognition of diverse belief systems. Their feedback suggests that ERB should either remain a discrete subject or be part of the patron's programme, rather than being integrated into SEE without clear guidelines and frameworks.

Infrastructural, Resourcing & Policy Issues

The barriers identified by INTO members in the SEE specification present significant challenges for schools. One major issue is that many schools are not adequately resourced to meet the learning outcomes as presented in the draft specification. Even schools that have some resources may find it difficult to implement the specification fully because the infrastructure of the school may not support many of the methods outlined in the SEE specification. For example, schools may lack adequate outdoor spaces for environmental learning activities or suitable facilities for the hands-on, experiential learning experiences promoted by the specification.

To engage fully with the SEE specification, schools need access to community areas if they do not have the necessary infrastructure themselves. Teachers have noted that community partnerships could play an important role in providing these resources. By collaborating with local organisations, such as libraries, museums, heritage centres, and local sports groups, schools can gain access to valuable learning environments and materials that they might otherwise lack. However, establishing and maintaining these partnerships requires significant support for school leaders. They need guidance and resources to navigate potential issues that might arise, such as the cost of travel and ensuring student safety.

Another concern raised by INTO members is the apprehension around engaging in outdoor activities or organising school trips. The costs of insurance and the litigative nature of society today act as substantial barriers to children's learning experiences outside the classroom. Schools are wary of the potential legal implications and financial costs that could result from accidents or incidents during these activities. This caution can limit the opportunities for pupils to engage in the immersive, real-world learning experiences that are central to the SEE curriculum.

To address these concerns, legislative action is required to ensure that schools are safeguarded as they work towards achieving the learning outcomes of the SEE curriculum. This could involve reforms to reduce the financial and legal risks associated with outdoor and community-based learning activities. Providing schools with clear guidelines and support on managing these risks, alongside appropriate legislative protections, would help alleviate the barriers and enable schools to offer richer SEE experiences.

Recommendations

- Ensure schools are supported to meet the learning outcomes of the SEE specification by providing funding and support for necessary infrastructure improvements.
- Encourage and support schools in establishing partnerships with local organisations, such as libraries, museums, and local sports groups. Provide guidance and resources to school leaders to navigate associated challenges.
- Advocate for policy/legislative reforms to mitigate the financial and legal risks associated with outdoor and off-site learning activities.

Education about Religions and Beliefs

Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) in the SEE specification presents several issues that need to be addressed. The outlined learning outcomes are broad and vague, posing a challenge for teachers and schools in determining what exactly needs to be taught in ERB. A specific listing of worldviews and belief systems, including non-theistic ones, is necessary to provide clear guidance. Without such specificity, there is a risk of inconsistent teaching practices and potential bias. This lack of clarity can also lead to confusion and make it difficult for teachers to deliver the specification effectively.

The current draft's approach could also result in a superficial teaching of belief systems, failing to provide the depth and rigour necessary for a comprehensive understanding of diverse religions and beliefs. Concerns about the potential for textbook companies to produce inadequate materials further highlights the need for strong toolkits. The toolkit must include materials that are objective, critical, and pluralist in nature to foster a respectful and inclusive learning environment for all pupils.

The integration of ERB into history and geography raises concerns about potential conflicts with religious beliefs, leading to opt-outs like those seen in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). Managing these opt-outs could pose significant challenges for schools, particularly in maintaining an inclusive educational experience for all pupils. If not handled carefully, the opt-out option could result in pupils missing valuable learning opportunities in SEE.

Training for teachers is necessary to handle the complexities of teaching ERB. This training should emphasise the importance of understanding and respecting diverse beliefs, equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge to deliver the curriculum appropriately. The INTO is particularly concerned about the level of work required for teachers to become proficient in teaching ERB. This is another area of the redeveloped curriculum that will require a shift in how schools plan for teaching and learning, significantly increasing the workload of principals and teachers if not managed and supported properly.

Recommendations

- Provide a detailed listing of worldviews and belief systems, including non-theistic ones, in the ERB curriculum.



- Ensure the availability of high-quality educational resources that are objective, critical, and pluralist to support a respectful and inclusive learning environment.
- Establish clear protocols for handling opt-outs related to ERB integration in history and geography.
- Implement robust training programmes for teachers to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to teach ERB effectively while mitigating any increased workload.

Science, Technology and Engineering Education

INTO members have an overall positive view of the draft Science, Technology, and Engineering (STE) specification. The draft specification is praised for its reflection of classroom realities and its potential to engage pupils meaningfully. It is recognised as progressive, promoting active and creative learning, and marks a significant step towards a more inclusive and engaging STE specification. The emphasis on “hands-on and minds-on learning” is also noted for aligning well with contemporary educational practices in STEM encouraging active participation and creativity among pupils.

One major concern by teachers is the need for a shift in classroom organisation to support the dynamic and child-led learning activities proposed by the specification. Traditional classroom layouts must now evolve into more interactive environments. This will require not only a change in teaching methodology but also a reorganisation of physical spaces to facilitate group work and hands-on activities. Classrooms will need to be larger and more flexible, with movable furniture and dedicated areas for different types of activities to support the new specification effectively. Without infrastructural improvements, the specification's potential to engage pupils and foster active learning will be significantly limited.

Adequate funding for materials and resources is also a concern among members. The specification's success depends heavily on the availability of materials to support hands-on learning. Without sufficient funding, schools may struggle to provide the necessary resources, thereby limiting the specification's potential impact. The 2023 STEM Learning Grant is insufficient in addressing these needs, and a more substantial, general allocation of funding is imperative to ensure all schools are adequately supported.

Some teachers have expressed worries about losing control in the more open-ended, pupil-led environment proposed by the STE specification. Professional development and support will be crucial in helping teachers feel confident and capable of managing these new learning dynamics. The emphasis on open-ended scientific inquiry is welcomed but requires teachers to be comfortable with a level of unpredictability and pupil autonomy that may be hard to introduce into classrooms that have broad learning needs.

The rollout of the Maths specification has provided a blueprint for the introduction of STE in 2025. While the rollout of the new Maths specification has been broadly successful, it has also highlighted the need for substantial support and resources. The phased approach to integrated STEM learning, involving the phases of Identify, Refine, Plan, Implement, and Evaluate, presents both opportunities and challenges. Ensuring that teachers have the necessary training, resources, and time to implement these phases effectively is essential. Any difficulties, such as engaging all pupils or addressing gaps in knowledge, can be mitigated through comprehensive PD and ongoing support.

While the draft STE specification represents a positive step towards modernising science, technology and engineering in Irish primary schools, its successful implementation depends on addressing varied concerns. The INTO is advocating for a collaborative approach in refining and implementing the specification to best serve the diverse needs of pupils and teachers alike.

Recommendations

- Provide schools with classrooms to accommodate interactive environments and facilitate diverse learning activities.
- Reduce class sizes to 20 pupils per class to ensure we consign supersized classes to history so children in primary school learn in classes that are in line with the EU average.
- Provide PD to help teachers manage open-ended, pupil-led learning environments confidently.

Transition to New Maths and STE Specifications in Primary Education

The rollout of the new Maths specification in primary schools has set a precedent for the upcoming introduction of the STE specification in September 2025. The Maths specification, which emphasises active and playful learning, problem-solving, and the use of manipulatives, has been well-received, with significant investment in professional development being welcomed by teachers. This support has been crucial in helping teachers adjust to new teaching methodologies and ensuring that they can effectively deliver the specification's objectives. However, the transition has not been without its challenges. Teachers still require time to understand and integrate the new ideas and approaches, and some have found the shift from known methods to more interactive, pupil-centred learning difficult.

Looking forward to the rollout of the STE specification, we must see similar, if not greater, levels of support and resources provided. The STE specification is complex, encompassing not only the traditional scientific principles but also the practical and theoretical aspects of technology and engineering. Teachers will need ample professional development opportunities to gain confidence in these areas, particularly those who may not have a strong background in technology or engineering. Additionally, schools will require funding to acquire the necessary materials and equipment to facilitate hands-on learning, which is a core component of the STE specification.

The structured approach to integrated STEM learning proposed in the specification, outlined in five phases—Identify, Refine, Plan, Implement, and Evaluate—encourage pupils to generate questions, refine their focus, develop plans, implement their designs, and evaluate their outcomes. This approach promotes critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration, skills essential for success in STE fields. Teachers will need practical examples of what this looks like in different types of classrooms, including special education settings and mixed class settings.

The integrated STEM approach provides a comprehensive framework for developing essential skills in pupils. However, the successful implementation of this approach depends on adequate support for teachers, including professional development, resources, and ongoing guidance. By ensuring that these supports are in place, we can facilitate a smooth transition to the new STE specification and help pupils develop the skills they need to thrive in an increasingly complex and technology-driven world.

Recommendations

- Provide face-to-face CPD focused on technology and engineering to build teacher confidence and competence in these areas.



- Provide practical examples tailored to different classroom settings, including special education and mixed classes.
- Allow teachers sufficient time to understand and integrate new methodologies, ensuring a smooth transition to a more interactive, pupil-centred learning experience.
- Establish mechanisms for ongoing feedback from teachers, principals, and pupils to continuously improve the implementation process.

Flawed Funding Models

The recent STEM Learning Grant falls woefully short of addressing the comprehensive needs of our primary schools. The INTO strongly opposes this piecemeal approach and insists on a general allocation of funding to support all schools adequately.

The provision of €1.5 million in 2023, with a maximum of €10,000 per school, is insufficient given the extensive needs of schools aiming to develop robust STEM programmes. This funding cap ignores the significant disparities in school sizes, resources, and student populations. Larger schools or those with higher enrolments and diverse needs will find this amount grossly inadequate for fostering a meaningful STEM education environment. Moreover, the expectation that this limited funding can significantly enhance, develop, or re-establish comprehensive STEM programmes is unrealistic and undervalues the true cost and effort required.

The application process itself is burdensome and exclusionary. By requiring detailed project plans and expressions of interest, the grant system places an undue administrative burden on already overworked principals. This is particularly problematic for schools with a teaching principal that may lack the administrative support necessary to complete the application process. Instead of empowering schools, this approach risks further entrenching educational inequities by privileging those with the resources to produce polished applications over those with genuine need but fewer resources to articulate it.

Alongside this the phased payment system of 85% at the start of December and the remaining 15% in the summer term, creates unnecessary complications and uncertainty. This fragmented schedule does not reflect schools funding needs and adds an extra layer of financial management that schools could do without. Schools require steady and reliable funding to plan and deliver the curriculum effectively, not staggered payments contingent on bureaucratic assessments of "project progress."

Furthermore, the expectation that schools must manage these projects with nominated persons who may already be stretched thin is impractical. Effective STEM education requires dedicated personnel who can commit fully to these programmes. Without proper staffing and professional development, the burden falls back on already overworked teachers, detracting from their teaching responsibilities. It is crucial to reinstate all middle leader posts to primary schools before the rollout of the STEM specification to ensure that the specification is effectively managed in schools.

To rectify this funding debacle, the INTO insists on a general allocation of funding that ensures every school receives the support necessary to build and sustain effective STEM programmes. This should include substantial funding for resources, CPD and staffing. Only through a robust, well-funded approach can we ensure that all pupils, regardless of their school's location or current resource level, have access to high-quality STEM education.

If this demand is not met, the INTO is prepared to mobilise to ensure that every school is adequately resourced. We will not stand by while our members are burdened with unrealistic expectations and

our pupils are deprived of the quality education they deserve. It is imperative that the Department of Education rethinks this flawed grant system and commits to a more equitable and sustainable funding model that truly supports all schools in nurturing future generations of STEM learners.

Recommendations

- Provide a general allocation of funding for STEM that adequately supports all schools.
- Ensure this funding model provides a consistent and reliable funding schedule that reflects schools' actual financial needs and simplifies financial management year on year.
- Reinstate all middle leader posts in primary schools, before the 2025 rollout, to ensure the effective implementation of the redeveloped curriculum.

Wellbeing

INTO members have responded positively to the draft curriculum specification, acknowledging its well thought out learning outcomes alongside clear strands and elements. The importance of teacher agency and autonomy, as well as the value of pupil voice, has been particularly well received. However, several areas require attention and improvement to ensure the curriculum's success and the wellbeing of all pupils.

A recurrent issue identified by INTO members is the urgent need for additional space and resources to facilitate PE, as current school facilities often fall short. Members have highlighted that different schools have varying levels of resources, leading to disparities in implementing the curriculum effectively. Timely and comprehensive resourcing, particularly the provision of toolkits and teacher guidance will be key to the success of the implementation of the redeveloped wellbeing curriculum. The quick delivery of these toolkits is essential to support teachers in adapting lessons to meet their pupils' needs.

Alongside this, members continue to call for CPD to bolster teacher confidence and expertise in delivering the curriculum, particularly around complex and sensitive topics within PE and SPHE. Teachers have consistently highlighted this need in previous feedback, and they continue to call for these essential supports. The Department of Education must take decisive action to ensure that all topics are comprehensively covered, enabling a fully rounded wellbeing education for all pupils.

Inclusivity and accessibility are also areas requiring enhancement. While the draft specification addresses the needs of various learners, there are gaps in providing guidance around differentiated support for children with additional needs. Members have also pointed out the necessity for specific training and resources to assist in teaching diverse student groups, including those with language barriers and other accessibility challenges. Additionally, the curriculum should explicitly incorporate and address the needs of LGBTQ+ community and other minoritised identities to foster an inclusive school environment.

A broader systemic issue impacting the wellbeing of children is the insufficient support at governmental and societal levels. Schools are making considerable efforts to cater to pupils' wellbeing, but wider societal issues such as the lack of therapeutic supports and inadequate municipal facilities significantly hinder these efforts. The wellbeing of children cannot be fully realised without a multi-disciplinary and inter-agency approach that includes in-school mental health support services, readily available therapeutic services, and adequate funding for necessary school and community resources.



In line with this, INTO members' feedback also highlights the need for clear and practical guides to the wellbeing curriculum for parents and guardians. Parental involvement is important for reinforcing the principles taught in school and ensuring that children receive consistent messages about wellbeing at home. Misinformation regarding the wellbeing curriculum is already an issue and providing accurate and comprehensive information to parents is essential to combat this misinformation. The Department of Education should, proactively, explore avenues for engaging parents, such as information sessions and resources for home use.

Finally, members highlighted the need for ongoing CPD that keeps pace with evolving educational needs and societal changes. Sustained training opportunities for teachers will ensure they are well-equipped to handle new and evolving topics, thereby maintaining the effectiveness and relevance of the wellbeing curriculum. Adequate funding, clear communication, and robust CPD must be prioritised to support teachers and school leaders in delivering the wellbeing specification.

Physical Education - Infrastructure, Funding and Policy Supports

To support PE in schools, it is imperative to provide facilities that are suited to the Irish climate. Schools face challenges with limited or no access to halls and are overly reliant on outdoor spaces, which are reliant on good weather conditions. Investing in municipal infrastructure, such as sports halls and multi-purpose rooms in schools, will ensure that PE is not disrupted by inclement weather. These facilities can serve not only schools but also the entire community, promoting physical activity and wellbeing for all and fostering a culture of health and fitness across schools, homes, and communities.

Funding for PE must prioritise the regular updating and maintenance of equipment without asking schools to compete through application-based funding systems, which can be unpredictable and inequitable. Instead, a model that allocates an annual fund specifically for PE equipment is needed. This ensures that all schools can plan and budget effectively, maintaining up-to-date and safe equipment for their pupils and carry-out a phased replacement of old equipment.

Integrating physical activity across the curriculum through the concept of an outdoor classroom can be highly beneficial. This approach allows physical activity to become a natural part of various subject areas, enhancing pupils' engagement and learning. For example, science lessons can include nature walks, while maths can involve physical exercises that illustrate mathematical concepts making learning more dynamic and engaging. However, there are significant concerns among schools regarding the increasingly litigative nature of society and the associated high costs of insurance. Robust government policies that help mitigate these worries and costs will ensure that the benefits of PE can be fully realised while also safeguarding teachers and schools.

Recommendations

- Prioritise funding for the construction and maintenance of sports halls and multi-purpose rooms to ensure PE can proceed regardless of weather conditions.
- Provide specific funding for transport and lessons to ensure all pupils have access to an annual aquatics programme.
- Provide an allocation specifically for the regular updating and maintenance of PE equipment, avoiding the inequity of application-based funding models.
- Develop robust government policies to mitigate the high insurance costs and litigative fears associated with outdoor activities, ensuring that schools can safely and confidently implement outdoor activities.

Inclusive and Diversity Education

Given the well-documented limitations of ‘celebratory’ approaches to diversity (Borrero et al., 2012; Nilsen et al., 2017), the INTO is concerned about the reference to ‘recognising and celebrating the diversity present within the classroom and in wider society’. The word ‘celebrate’ can be problematic in the context of diversity as the focus shifts to what makes people different, rather than creating a space where everyone feels welcome and valued regardless of their background. While diversity is valuable, constantly celebrating it can make people from minority groups feel ‘othered.’ Sometimes ‘celebrating’ diversity becomes a performative act, a box to be ticked, rather than leading to actual change or dismantling existing inequalities.

It is crucial that the curriculum aims to address the underlying issues that create challenges for minoritised groups and goes beyond celebration, working towards creating a more equitable environment. Instead of ‘celebrating’ diversity, it is better to use language that frames diversity as a natural, ongoing process of learning, growth, and inclusion. Within that context, the INTO suggests that the ‘celebratory’ language is reviewed and replaced with more inclusive language. The draft wellbeing specification commendably incorporates inclusive language in other areas, particularly around family structures, and acknowledges the diversity of family structures by referring to mother-and-father-headed families, co-parenting families, one-parent families, same-sex parent families, extended families, stepfamilies, adoptive families, foster families, and more, rather than assuming a single-family model. This should be mirrored across the entire document.

The INTO notes with disappointment the dearth of reference to LGBTQ+ identity in the draft specification. The INTO has long been assured by the Department of Education and its various agencies that LGBTQ+ inclusion would be addressed within the context of the redeveloped SPHE/wellbeing curriculum. The glaring absence of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the specification is a missed opportunity to create a safe, respectful, and inclusive learning environment for all pupils. Invisibility is a powerful force for breeding marginalisation. This lack of reference has the potential to make LGBTQ+ pupils, and other marginalised groups, feel invisible and marginalised within the school environment. The INTO is concerned that if this is not addressed that it could be another 20 years before this issue can be tackled.

Recent research undertaken by Belong-To (2024) indicates that Irish primary school teachers show a strong interest in, and commitment to, the creation of inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ pupils. Notwithstanding this positive disposition to address LGBTQ+ inclusion, teachers reported that they lack the confidence and knowledge to effectively implement LGBTQ+ inclusive practices. This highlights a need for additional support, training, and guidance in this area. One noteworthy comment from a participant suggested that “until LGBTQ+ issues and topics are outlined in the curriculum, we cannot teach them safely yet. Teachers will not teach something that is not on the curriculum.” The research also identified a lack of specificity in the curriculum as a key barrier to being LGBTQ+ inclusive in teaching. The INTO is concerned that the Wellbeing curriculum continues with a broad and general approach to equality and inclusion rather than specifically naming and addressing areas of injustice and inequality. A truly inclusive curriculum can create a safer space, reduce isolation, and contribute to better mental health outcomes for all pupils. LGBTQ+ pupils, teachers and families are a significant part of society and ignoring their stories and experiences presents an incomplete picture of the world. Overall, addressing LGBT+ issues in the curriculum contributes to a more inclusive, respectful, tolerant, and understanding learning environment that will benefit all pupils.

It is difficult to respond comprehensively to the draft specification in the absence of the wellbeing online toolkit which promises to contain a range of supports for enacting the curriculum such as support materials and examples of children’s learning. It is crucial that the toolkit will include resources and supports with strong and authentic representation. A truly inclusive curriculum ensures minoritised pupil groups see themselves reflected in what they learn, which can be validating and empowering. The curriculum is a mechanism for crafting social narrative and for telling stories about individuals,



groups, and society. As such, it is important that all members of society be represented within the narrative. Inclusive texts that represent a diversity of pupils must be present in the curriculum if we are to work toward a more equitable and just society. When children see characters who reflect their own identities and experiences, it sends a powerful message that they are normal, valued members of society. By exposing children to diverse families and relationships, inclusive texts and resources can help to break down stereotypes and create a more inclusive learning environment.

The definitions of equality, inequality, and discrimination within the wellbeing curriculum should be strengthened with specific references to the personal characteristics protected under the Equal Status Acts (gender, marital status, family status, disability, race, religion, age, sexual orientation, and membership of the Traveller community). By explicitly naming these characteristics the curriculum will provide a clearer framework for understanding and addressing discrimination in all its forms.

The draft specification also draws attention to the fact that socio-economic status can significantly impact a student's wellbeing and educational outcomes. The specification should explore ways to incorporate meaningful discussions and activities that address socio-economic diversity. By doing this, the curriculum can help foster empathy and understanding among pupils from diverse backgrounds, promoting a more inclusive school environment.

The redevelopment of the curriculum should also be viewed as a period to develop teachers and school leaders' capacity to create trauma-informed school environments. Many pupils experience trauma, which can significantly impact their ability to learn and thrive in school. By training teachers to recognise and respond to signs of trauma, and by incorporating trauma-informed practices into the curriculum, schools can better support the mental health and wellbeing of all pupils. The INTO notes the reference to Circular 0042/2018 which states that 'the qualified classroom teacher is the best placed professional to work sensitively and consistently with pupils and she/he can have a powerful impact on influencing pupils' attitudes, values, and behaviour in all aspects of wellbeing education'. The INTO agrees that the classroom teacher is best placed to effectively implement the Wellbeing Curriculum given their established relationship with the children and their pedagogical and curriculum knowledge.

The wellbeing curriculum must reflect the diversity of the society we live in now and into the future. It should actively seek to support and amplify the voices of those who champion inclusivity and the varied life experiences of all people. The curriculum should not only acknowledge these diverse perspectives but also foster a critical lens through which pupils are encouraged to challenge and call out prejudiced thinking that prevents individuals from being their authentic selves. By doing so, the curriculum will lay a foundational understanding of empathy, equality, and social justice in primary school pupils, empowering them to advocate for a more inclusive and equitable society. This approach is essential for developing a fully rounded wellbeing education that truly supports every student's right to be themselves and thrive in a supportive community.

Recommendations

- Explicitly include references to personal characteristics protected under the Equal Status Acts (gender, marital status, family status, disability, race, religion, age, sexual orientation, and Traveller community membership) to provide a clear framework for understanding and addressing discrimination.
- Explicitly mention LGBTQ+ identities and experiences in the curriculum to address stigma and discrimination, fostering a supportive environment and affirming these identities.
- Provide professional development for teachers to support the delivery of the wellbeing specification.
- Incorporate discussions and activities that address socio-economic diversity to foster empathy and understanding among pupils from different backgrounds to their own.
- Support school leaders to create trauma-informed environments, recognising and responding to signs of trauma to better support the mental health and wellbeing of all pupils.

Relationship & Sexuality Education

The INTO strongly supports the inclusion and development of Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) within the wellbeing specification of the redeveloped curriculum and notes its key role in fostering child safety and well-being. Grounded in best practice, RSE must remain an integral part of the well-being curriculum, being introduced from an early age to equip children with the knowledge and skills necessary for understanding their relationship with themselves and others.

RSE from an early age ensures that children develop the capability to recognise and establish healthy relationships while identifying and avoiding those that are harmful. RSE, as part of the wellbeing specification, also teaches children about the natural changes their bodies undergo, promoting a sense of normalcy and understanding about their development. Through RSE, children learn that their needs and experiences are acknowledged and supported, fostering a sense of security and well-being.

RSE in the Wellbeing specification does not only focus on the biological aspects of sexuality but also includes social, emotional, and ethical dimensions. This curriculum's approach to RSE includes lessons on respect, consent, healthy relationships, and personal safety, promoting a holistic and safe development for all children.

While the Irish Constitution designates parents as a child's primary teachers, the well-being curriculum must balance parental roles with the educational needs of pupils. It is essential for all stakeholders, including parents and schools, to collaborate and support the delivery of RSE, ensuring it is consistent with best practices. Parental views should be respected yet balanced with the overarching goal of child safety and well-being.

Opposition to RSE in the curriculum often stems from a lack of understanding around pupil safety. Here, it is important that both the government and wider society supports schools in developing a clear understanding for the need for a comprehensive RSE programme in our primary schools. Schools cannot combat the misinformation circulating around RSE on their own. Recent events outside our public libraries, where extreme elements protested books on relationships and sexuality, highlight the



potential for similar events to occur outside our schools. This poses a real concern for schools, as they fear these events could directly impact the lives of their staffs and pupils. It is crucial for all stakeholders, including parents, and all relevant government departments, to collaborate and stand firmly in support of RSE to ensure the well-being and safety of all pupils.

With that in mind, INTO members have voiced a need for more support and training to effectively deliver RSE, particularly in senior classes where the content can be more complex and sensitive. The INTO highlights the necessity for comprehensive professional development to support teachers to confidently teach RSE, so that the curriculum is delivered uniformly across all primary schools.

The INTO also wishes to point out the importance of teachers being trained to identify signs of neglect or abuse, advocating for children who may not be supported adequately at home. The role of teachers as advocates for their pupils is crucial in safeguarding children's well-being, particularly when their home environments may not.

The continuation and frequent review of the *Stay Safe* programme is also strongly endorsed by the INTO. This programme is vital in educating children about personal safety, teaching them to recognise and resist abuse and bullying through lessons on safe and unsafe situations, inappropriate touch, secrets, and stranger danger. Aligning the *Stay Safe* programme with the wellbeing specification ensures it remains as a key tool in preventing child abuse.

Recommendations

- Provide comprehensive training and support for teachers to ensure they can confidently and uniformly deliver RSE across all primary schools.
- Ensure all teachers have training enabling them to identify signs of neglect or abuse.
- Regularly review the *Stay Safe* programme to maintain its effectiveness in educating children about personal safety and preventing child abuse.
- Develop wider society's understanding of RSE through national and community-based awareness campaigns to help combat misinformation and support schools.
- Provide meaningful and sustained training around child safety protocols in primary schools.

Section 3: Implementing the Curriculum

Time for Implementation

Time for teachers to engage with a new curriculum is identified as a key priority. Reflecting on schools' experience in enacting the Primary Language Curriculum and the Primary Maths Curriculum, teachers, through INTO consultations, highlighted the importance of an appropriately staged and well-managed implementation that provides schools with the time to become familiar with new content, learning outcomes, and pedagogies, ensuring these approaches can be embedded across all curricular areas. There is a consensus among INTO members that comprehensive in-person in-service training is required to develop teachers' confidence and familiarity with the new curriculum specifications. Members who experienced the transition to the 1999 curriculum recall the extensive in-service support provided at the time, contrasting this with the more "rushed" implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum. Teachers call for a phased introduction of the new curriculum, allowing ample time for schools to explore and trial new methods of planning and preparation for effective teaching and learning in their individual contexts. This staged rollout must include facilitated face to face in-service training and school planning days for all teachers within school contact hours.

Teachers expressed concerns around the timing of the rollout of the revised curriculum and their confusion around what they perceive to be an ad-hoc, unstructured approach to curriculum change. The INTO notes with some worry that the overarching philosophy and structure of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* may not be fully embedded in schools before the rollout of subject specifications begins, causing uncertainty for teachers. A well planned out and structured approach to curriculum development must be provided, with clear communication to ensure a consistent rollout of the redeveloped curriculum across all primary schools.

Developing a strong understanding of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* alongside the DE's *Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning* would be an appropriate starting point. These documents provide a foundation for teachers and school leaders, aiding their understanding of how to approach the proposed subject specifications. The INTO is aware that neither document has received the necessary time and supports to have them fully embedded across the system. Prioritising training around these guidance documents in the next school year will allow teachers to engage meaningfully with the new approaches for teaching and learning at both individual and whole-school levels.

It is extremely important that the Department of Education heeds the needs of teachers regarding the time required for implementing the redeveloped curriculum. A comprehensive, long-term plan outlining the rollout of the redeveloped primary curriculum is essential. This plan must consider the current teaching context, characterised by overcrowded classes, under-resourced classrooms, an overloaded curriculum, an ever-increasing workload, a lack of support services, and a recruitment and retention crisis. The INTO will not hesitate to mobilise its members and take decisive action if schools are asked to begin the rollout of the curriculum without a comprehensive plan before the end of 2024.

The Department should minimise the number of new initiatives introduced in schools over the coming years. The focus should be on embedding the redeveloped curriculum effectively in all primary schools. Without adequate implementation time and high quality face to face CPD, teachers will perceive the curriculum rollout as rushed, leading to long-term negative perceptions among most primary school teachers. This would result in the curriculum being viewed unfavourably for the next 20 years.



Recommendations

- Implement the new curriculum in a phased manner, allowing sufficient time for teachers to become familiar with new content, learning outcomes, and pedagogies.
- Provide in person facilitated in-service training and school planning days for all teachers within school contact hours to develop teachers' confidence and familiarity with the new curriculum.
- Develop a thoughtful and structured plan for the implementation of the curriculum, ensuring clear communication and consistent rollout across all primary schools.
- Focus on embedding the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the DE's Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning ahead of the proposed September 2025 specification rollout.

Support for School Leaders

Leading and managing a school today is a challenging endeavour. Understanding and meeting the needs of all stakeholders involved in a school environment requires a dynamic set of skills (Bush & Middlewood, 2013). This multifaceted job demands principals to be leaders, HR managers, accountants, policy developers, motivators, counsellors, conflict mediators, public relations experts, curriculum experts, data analysts, facilities managers, health and safety officers, IT coordinators, community liaisons, fundraising managers, and SSE planners, to name but a few. The imminent rollout of the redeveloped curriculum in September 2025 adds another layer of complexity to their role. There is a critical need for comprehensive and timely training for school leaders not just in subject delivery, but also in managing their schools through change.

School leadership significantly influences the success of student learning, second only to teacher instruction (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). The ability of school leaders to effectively lead and manage their schools is paramount. Unfortunately, with less than 15 months before the redeveloped curriculum rollout, INTO members feel that school leaders have been left in the dark about upcoming changes as they relate to the running of and the impact on, their schools.

INTO members have been unanimous in calling for the provision of supports around curriculum delivery to be prioritised for primary school principals. The Department of Education has, regrettably, delayed addressing this need, leaving principals without the necessary supports to effectively implement the new curriculum changes. This lack of foresight and preparation by the Department is a disservice not only to the principals themselves but also to their teachers and the pupils in their schools. Well informed and well prepared school leadership is needed for a successful curriculum rollout, and this absence of training will negatively impact the overall learning outcomes for pupils.

Another important step towards addressing the lack of support for school leaders, is the full reinstatement of middle leadership posts in all primary schools before the rollout begins. Middle leaders play an essential role in supporting principals. By reinstating these 1700 vacant positions, schools can better manage the demands of the coming years, allowing principals to utilise the expertise that exists in their schools. This distribution of leadership knowledge and skills will ensure a smooth and more effective rollout of the new curriculum in our primary schools.

The Department of Education's neglect in providing adequate training and support for school leaders ahead of the new curriculum rollout is a significant failing. This oversight risks undermining the

effectiveness of the curriculum implementation and the overall quality of education provided to pupils. School leaders must be equipped not only with the skills to deliver curriculum content but also to manage their organisations through this period of change. The Department, through OIDE Leadership, must act swiftly to rectify this situation, ensuring that school leaders are not left to navigate these challenges alone.

Recommendations

- Provide PD for all primary school leaders that covers both curriculum content delivery and school change management.
- Reinstate all 1700 posts of responsibility to support school principals in distributing responsibilities to effectively manage the upcoming and continuous school changes.
- Establish clear and ongoing communication channels between the Department of Education and school leaders to provide timely updates and support regarding upcoming changes and expectations.
- Conduct reviews and provide feedback sessions for principals to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum rollout and the support being provided to school leaders.

Training & CPD

The INTO firmly believes that the success of the redeveloped curriculum hinges on a robust and comprehensive training and CPD plan. Our members have unanimously insisted that the core training and CPD for each subject specification be delivered face-to-face within school hours. This school closure time should not be viewed as a disruption but rather as a vital investment in the future success of our education system.

It is inherently unfair to ask any worker, including teachers, to complete core training outside of work hours. Teachers already face significant challenges, and adding to their workload during their own personal time only adds to these. Teachers who feel properly supported through investment in their training during school hours will return that investment in their teaching, benefiting their pupils.

High quality training ensures that teachers are well-prepared to deliver the redeveloped curriculum effectively, fostering a deeper understanding and confidence in the material. This, in turn, directly benefits the pupils, who will receive a higher quality of education. Ancillary and elective CPD opportunities, while valuable, must complement and not replace the essential face-to-face training within school hours. Additional sessions can be offered online or after school but should not make up the core CPD package.

The provision of high quality training is non-negotiable, and if the training and CPD schedule for the redeveloped curriculum falls short of the required standards, the INTO is prepared to take decisive action to ensure our members receive the professional development they deserve.

The Department of Education must prioritise the needs and best interests of teachers, principals, and pupils alike. Ensuring that teachers have access to high-quality CPD with school closures is essential for the effective implementation of the redeveloped curriculum and for delivering a high quality educational experience for all pupils. The INTO is committed to advocating for our members and will continue to push for the necessary support and resources to achieve these goals.



Recommendations

- Ensure that the core training, support and CPD for each subject specification is delivered face-to-face within school hours.
- Ensure that ancillary and elective CPD offered outside of school hours, complements, and does not replace core training.

Curriculum Review

The rollout of the redeveloped curriculum in Irish primary schools must ensure ample opportunities for thorough and meaningful curriculum reviews from a diverse array of stakeholders. A particular emphasis must be placed on prioritising the insights and experiences of teachers and principals. As the education professionals, implementing the curriculum, teachers and principals possess the practical knowledge and firsthand experience that is critical to its continuous evaluation and improvement.

Research highlights the significance of ongoing curriculum evaluation as an essential component for maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of education systems. The OECD's findings (2018) state that systematic curriculum review processes are vital for adapting educational practices to evolving societal needs and technological advancements. This ensures that pupils will be equipped with the skills necessary for the 21st century, making the curriculum not only contemporary but also future-oriented.

The implementation plan for the redeveloped primary curriculum should include reviews at least 18 months after the implementation of each subject specification. These reviews should be conducted through school networks that are representative of the national school system, with different schools selected for each review cycle. The involvement of the INTO in facilitating the selection of schools will ensure that the process is representative and thorough.

The findings from these reviews must be taken seriously, with the feedback from teachers and principals driving necessary adaptations to the curriculum. This will ensure that the redeveloped curriculum is continually refined to meet the actual needs of the primary education system. In valuing and prioritising the voices of those who implement the curriculum daily, the education system can foster a more responsive, and inclusive educational environment for all pupils.

Recommendations

- Implement systematic curriculum reviews 18 months post-rollout of each subject specification using representative school networks.
- Prioritise the insights and experiences of teachers and principals during curriculum reviews.
- Integrate the findings from curriculum reviews to maintain the curriculum's relevance ensuring it meets the evolving needs of Irish primary pupils.

Textbooks

INTO members have expressed concerns about aspects of the *Primary Schoolbooks Scheme*, noting that it potentially channels public funds into the hands of private textbook publishers. This allows these publishers to interpret and shape the national curriculum through their own lens, which can introduce biases and inconsistencies. The scheme may put pressure on schools to purchase and use textbooks, creating a dependency that is not aligned with the pedagogical methods in the PCF.

Textbooks can be rigid and inflexible, failing to cater to the needs of all pupils. They also may not reflect current knowledge and societal changes, leading to outdated and sometimes irrelevant content being taught in classrooms. Textbooks can also perpetuate stereotypes and lack inclusive representation of various ethnic, cultural, and social groups, which can alienate pupils from minority backgrounds and fail to provide them with a relatable and inclusive learning experience.

The Department of Education's *Primary Schoolbooks Scheme* stands in stark contrast to the principles outlined in the PCF, which advocates for a more holistic, flexible, and inclusive approach to education. The framework emphasises the importance of varied pedagogical methods and the use of diverse learning materials to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

It is essential that the Department of Education reimagine this scheme to ensure it best serves the interests of pupils and supports the successful implementation of the redeveloped curriculum. Providing subject-specific toolkits and resources that enable teachers to move away from a textbook-centric approach should be considered. These toolkits should include up-to-date digital resources, interactive activities, and materials that reflect the diverse backgrounds of pupils, fostering a more engaging and inclusive learning environment. The Department of Education must guide funding for materials and resources that support innovative and inclusive teaching practices, ensuring that all pupils receive a high-quality education tailored to their unique needs and contexts.

Recommendations

- Provide schools with access to diverse materials such as educational videos, interactive lessons, and online supports on a digital platform created by the NCCA.
- Create toolkits that teachers can adapt to meet the specific needs of their pupils.
- Establish a platform where teachers can share lessons and resources with each other.
- Support schools in creating learning environments that can be adapted for various lessons and activities.
- Ensure funding is distributed in a way that enables schools to purchase a variety of educational resources.
- Develop resources to help parents support their children's learning at home.



Manging Expectations

As mentioned in previous sections, teachers regularly refer to the burdensome paperwork associated with their role and express their dissatisfaction at the diminution of creativity owing to the large amount of time devoted to preparation of lengthy documents. Many members feel that this time could be used more effectively, efficiently, and creatively in other ways to benefit the holistic wellbeing of pupils. Excessive amounts of time spent on written planning and recording could instead be used to create more stimulating resources that are suited to classroom context and/or organise activities within the local environment. Such collaboration with community projects or local arts and cultural organisations reflects the ‘partnership’ principle of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and helps to develop pupils’ competency of ‘being an active citizen.’

Teachers also highlight the demands that they face in engaging with initiatives and extra-curricular projects. Schools are sometimes viewed as the ideal venue to address many societal issues with many lobby groups and state organisations providing schemes and initiatives which schools are expected to implement. This is evident in the various programmes for which schools are awarded a flag, for example ‘Green Schools’ and ‘Active School Flag.’ In the INTO survey on workload school leaders identified participation and engagement in whole-school initiatives as a contributing factor to increased workload and paperwork. Teachers also highlight the time and effort that engagement with these programmes demands but point to pressure from parents/guardians and the wider public to respond to societal trends and current issues. Addressing this dilemma is difficult as teachers and principals recognise the value of many of these programmes, but the reality is that in an already overloaded curriculum, too much is expected of schools. It is hoped that the integrated approach to teaching and learning at the core of the PCF could help to alleviate the burden associated with the ever-increasing demands of school-based initiatives.

The INTO has expressed significant concerns regarding the language used in relation to the redeveloped curriculum. It is imperative that the Department for Education and its support services understand that the five specifications may seem like merely five subject areas, however, when broken down, these specifications encompass fifteen distinct subjects that will need to be addressed during the curriculum rollout. An oversimplification may suggest a lack of depth in the department's understanding of the true scope and complexity of the task at hand.

The INTO is deeply concerned at the level of understanding within the Department for Education regarding what this redevelopment entails. We believe there is a fundamental underestimation of the resources, time, and planning required to effectively implement these changes. The INTO demands that the Department for Education acknowledge the complexity of this curriculum redevelopment and respond with a detailed implementation plan. Anything less would not only undermine the process but also fail to address the legitimate concerns of teachers who are on the frontline of delivering this curriculum. We urge the government to take these concerns seriously and act promptly to ensure the successful rollout of the new curriculum.

Recommendations

- Promote a supportive and advisory approach among Inspectors, ensuring they provide consistent guidance during the curriculum rollout.
- Streamline any required paperwork and written planning, allowing teachers to focus more on creating engaging teaching and learning experiences.



- Promote an integrated approach to curriculum planning, with specific non-contact time supported by substitution cover, to allow teachers to engage in collaborative planning without adding additional out of hours workload.
- Limit the expectations placed on schools to participate in numerous societal initiatives and extra-curricular projects.
- Establish a dedicated task force comprising teachers, curriculum experts, and departmental support services to collaboratively develop a comprehensive implementation plan for the redeveloped curriculum.



Conclusion

The process of redeveloping the primary curriculum in Ireland presents an opportunity to enhance and modernise education, reflecting the needs and realities of our current educational and societal landscape. Teachers hold the 1999 curriculum in high regard for its holistic and child-centred approach, clear objectives, and emphasis on collaboration and active learning. Any new curriculum must retain these strengths.

Irish teachers have consistently shown their commitment to providing high-quality education, even in the face of significant challenges such as large class sizes, curriculum overload, inadequate resources and school infrastructure, and lack of therapeutic and social services. Their resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, where they adapted to remote learning virtually overnight, exemplifies their dedication to their pupils' success. As we look to the future, it is essential that we build on this dedication and provide teachers with the tools they need to deliver a redeveloped curriculum that meets the needs of all pupils.

The voice of teachers and school leaders must be the most listened to in relation to the rollout of the curriculum. These are the professionals who understand the practical realities of the classroom and who are best placed to provide valuable insights into what works and what does not. Their experiences and feedback should continue to guide the development and implementation process, ensuring that the curriculum is both practical and works in our classrooms.

The imminent rollout of the redeveloped curriculum must address the unique needs of all pupils, including those with special and additional educational needs. Early intervention programmes and social, emotional and behaviour supports are essential, and this requires a concerted effort by the Government to provide schools with adequate therapeutic and social services. The success of the new curriculum will depend on the availability of these support systems, ensuring that every child can fully participate in their education.

The NCCA has laid a foundation with the *Primary Curriculum Framework*. This framework emphasises thematic and integrative teaching, inclusive education, diversity, and updated assessment practices. However, for the redeveloped curriculum to succeed, it requires more than just a solid framework; it needs ample time and resources. The INTO stresses that this process must not be rushed. Rushing the implementation of the new curriculum will have detrimental effects on education outcomes for years to come. It is essential that the Department of Education commits to a phased and well-supported rollout, ensuring that every teacher is adequately prepared, and every school is sufficiently resourced.

The Department of Education must recognise that there will be a cost associated with these changes. Cutting corners is not an option. The INTO is ready to act decisively should there be any attempt to implement the curriculum on a shoestring budget, which would inevitably compromise the working conditions and well-being of our members. We will not allow the quality of education or the professional dignity of our teachers to be undermined by insufficient funding or support.

As we move forward in the coming years, it is essential that all stakeholders work collaboratively to create a curriculum that stands the test of time. The most innovative curriculum in the world has no value if it is beyond the capability of the teachers to teach it. It is crucial that the redeveloped curriculum's specifications are realistic, practical, and supported by comprehensive professional development and toolkits. The INTO calls on the Department of Education to provide comprehensive professional development opportunities, adequate resourcing, and sufficient time for the successful implementation of the new curriculum. Together, we can build a curriculum that will stand the test of time and provide every child with the chance to thrive. The future of our primary system is in our hands, let us rise to the challenge and make it a future we can all be proud of.

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