

RE-DEVELOPMENT OF PRIMARY CURRICULUM

*In-Person Consultation Focus
Group with Parents*



NPC

SUPPORTING PARENTS
SUPPORTING CHILDREN

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Introduction

The National Parents Council (NPC) is delighted to share the views of parents on the primary curriculum review and redevelopment with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

NPC invited parents to a consultation event on the 11th of May 2024. Invitations were sent to our database; our members and the event was promoted on our website and social media channels.

13 parents from around the country attended the event.

NPC was supported at the consultation by the NCCA who gave a brief overview of the progress to date of the redevelopment of the primary curriculum and acted as note takers.

Parents were given the opportunity to comment on the 5 subject areas and the key competencies which will form the basis of the redeveloped curriculum.

We asked two key questions for each area.

Q. 1 Name one thing you think is important in this subject area.

Q. 2 What do you think your involvement as a parent should be?

We also gave parents a chance to share their views on any other aspects of the proposals for the curriculum review.

All comments were recorded and have been shared here.



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ARTS EDUCATION

ART, MUSIC & DRAMA



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Question 1: Name one thing you think is important in this subject area:

Drama Education:

A few parents expressed the view that drama classes provide an excellent outlet for children to explore their creativity, build confidence, and develop communication skills. Some parents specifically suggested including structured drama sessions, where children can learn about storytelling, role-playing, improvisation, and even scriptwriting.

Music Education:

Some parents stated that schools have a responsibility to encourage music education among children. They suggested different ways to do this including, allowing children to bring their own instruments to practise during music time, establishing music clubs in schools to promote musical exploration, inviting professional musicians to inspire children, and introducing each child to a simple musical instrument during primary school. One parent stated that finding music teachers can be challenging, while emphasising that making music education accessible within schools is important.



Confidence Through Performance:

Some parents gave the view that performing can boost confidence, especially for shy children. For these parents, incorporating performances into the curriculum is important as it allows students to showcase their talents. There was a view also that while the arts should be open to everyone, not every child wants to perform. In the view of these parents, children can still contribute as prop designers, musicians, or directors. In addition to that, while the artistic process is essential, parents stated that there's joy in the final product of whatever artistic work children are undertaking. There was an alternative view that balancing assessment in arts education is crucial. This group of parents stated that too many performance-based assessments can lead to anxiety among students.

Art Exploration:

A small group of parents felt it would be a good idea to invite artists to present different art forms (e.g. Lino cutting/printing) to engage children, who may not always be interested in art. They added that it is important that their children be encouraged to experiment with various techniques and materials, such as clay from the beach.

Advantages of Arts Education:

Most parents acknowledged the advantages of arts education, including the development of skills such as critical thinking, open-mindedness, imagination, and creativity. Some parents also emphasised the therapeutic effects of the arts through reducing stress and promoting healing.



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Question 2:

What do you think your involvement as a parent should be?

Additional Support:

There was a view among a small group of parents that there is a need for more support and advice from school on encouraging children to be engaged in the arts. Some parents stated that they prefer hands-on work, while others stated that they prefer digital technology. A small group of parents think there is lots of advice for parents in language and numeracy, but not so much in the Arts. They suggested that a check-list on how to support their child would be beneficial. One parent added that there is lack of feedback provided by primary schools to them compared to post-primary. When it comes to faith-based schools in Ireland, a small group of parents from other faiths stated that they need to be consulted on the ways their children are being involved in certain artistic practices.


Parental Involvement:

Some parents said they want to be involved in bringing their children to watch performances by artists and musicians in the streets. In their view, not only is it important that their children are following their interests in the Arts, but that teachers and the curriculum facilitate that for their children. For instance, one parent suggested organising a 'language week', where parents are invited to use their language and the Arts of their culture. This will show children, in their view, that parents are part of the school and care about what they learn at school. Another parent said they are responsible for encouraging their children to listen to different songs and share them with friends as a form of cultural exchange.



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SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND ENGINEERING EDUCATION



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Question 1: Name one thing you think is important in this subject area.

The Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI):

According to most parents, technology is important in children's lives. While a small group of parents recognised the importance of learning about AI and how it can be used as a method of assessment, they had concerns around it. In their view, there will always be a need for teachers because the human element of teaching is irreplaceable.

Concerns around STE Subjects:

A minority of parents stated that they had concerns about Maths, Science, and Engineering. When it comes to the Maths curriculum, these parents were of the view that it is not challenging enough. They also added that particular attention should be given to science to help children cultivate a strong foundation for laboratory work. As for Engineering, a small group of parents stated that children should be engaged in physical and visual learning without a screen.



Concerns around the use of Technology:

All parents agreed, technology is important, yet some had reservations around it. Some parents said they don't allow access to technology at young ages, so their decision should be respected when it comes to technology use in school. Parents highlighted that in science and engineering, hands-on projects are important, and no screens should be used. Some parents added that their primary school does not offer computer classes, creating inequalities among students.



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Question 2:

What do you think your involvement as a parent should be?

Technology as a Tool:

While recognising technology as an important tool, some parents stated that they wanted their children to come out of school with good mathematical skills, be able to read, and understand their place in the world. In order to understand what their child is being taught at the school; one parent emphasised the need for Toolkits in STE to be published.

There was a view, Rote Learning cultivates foundational knowledge in the maths and sciences. Based on this view, most parents find it important that children understand that technology is a tool rather than an alternative to other learning methods. As part of using this tool, some parents stated that children need to understand what the role of technology is, the values underlying it, and its history. In doing so, these parents asked that their children continue developing their social skills, which should not be replaced by technology.

Concerns around Technology:

According to a small group of parents, children should learn about the history of technology, and the developments it has undergone before using it. At the same time, one parent stated that technology could have effects on the mental health and wellbeing of their child. This parent was specifically worried about the muscle at the back of the eye of their children due to the overuse of phones. Most parents think introducing technology must be done at an appropriate age, while not replacing books.



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Concerns around Technology:

They emphasised that the physicality of books is important for some students. One parent gave the example of neuro-diverse children, who sometimes prefer books rather than the use of technology in classrooms.

Many parents stated that they want to be consulted about the use of screens in schools. They emphasised the importance of integrating competencies in this area. Some parents objected to what seemed in their view, an “in-direct messaging related to SPHE” being brought into other topics (e.g. non-traditional family structures). They stated that learning should be neutral, where social issues, values, and concepts in wellbeing are left for parents to teach their children about.

Concerns around Content:

Some parents highlighted STEM as a crucial area, where it must be promoted amongst all children. These parents stated that the way children are being educated about STEM is very foundational. Instead, they suggested the need for a space for some children to excel in these areas. They added that Science books in first class and second class are very similar, so there needs to be different topics for each class.

Some parents asked that gifted child programmes be more equitable. They suggested that teachers engage them more when it comes to math and sciences. One way to do this a parent suggested is through sending home materials to allow parents to incorporate it at home and in the day-to-day life of their children.



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SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION **(GEOGRAPHY & HISTORY)**



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Question 1: Name one thing you think is important in this subject area.

Initial comments

Children's learning about who we are, where we are, and where we fit in the world as part of Geography was identified by some parents as an important aspect of Social and Environmental Education

Referring to the proposed strand 'Exploration of our world' it was stated by one parent that the world 'their' would be more appropriate ('Exploration of their world')

Concerns around Content:

A small group of parents had concerns around the use of the term 'equity' within the document. These concerns are based on their view of equity as being different from equality. This is because, in their view, children may have equality of opportunity, but there will not be equality of outcome. One parent also expressed dissatisfaction at the incorporation of the term 'social justice' as this term means something different depending on the community. One parent made a point that some of the concepts within the draft Social and Environmental specification speak to critical race theory and serve to promote racism rather than avoid it. One parent made another point about History being used as a tool for activism and the inclusion of gender identity in the redeveloped primary curriculum. (This was more relevant to the draft curriculum specification for Wellbeing but there was a fear that this could also fall under the 'Social' aspect of 'Social and Environmental Education').



Outdoor Activities:

Most parents agree that outdoor activities are important as they offer the opportunity for practical learning. Field trips, for example, were identified by one parent as a key aspect of learning in Geography. In addition, the emphasis on the local environment was welcomed. Many parents think children should be provided with opportunities to learn about people from their locality who have made a difference to society in different spheres (such as the Arts, Sports, STEM, etc.)

Methods of Learning:

A small group of parents believe it is important that teaching in this curriculum area is based on facts rather than ideologies. One parent highlighted the importance of learning from history instead of focusing merely on certain events within a particular history. For example, when engaging with the theme of conflict, this parent felt that children should learn about how countries overcame conflict and the lessons learnt rather than a narrow focus on the causes of conflict.

An opinion was expressed by one parent that teaching religion in Social and Environmental Education is not a good idea. From the viewpoint of this parent, religion always has a connection to politics. Another parent made a point that time allocated to teaching about religion is being taken from other curriculum areas, and that more time should be afforded to core subjects.



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Repercussions of Learning about Challenges:

According to some parents, an over-emphasis on challenges and crises can pose a potential risk, where learning about such challenges could have a negative effect on children and their wellbeing. A view was expressed that children in primary school are too young to be dealing with issues such as climate change and that “it is the role of parents to protect children and solve problems”. One attendee cited recent research which reveals an increased level of distress among children and expressed fear that some of the proposed content of the Social and Environmental Education curriculum could exacerbate children’s anxiety. One attendee made the comment “they are primary school children; it is not their job to save the world...let them enjoy childhood and learn about these in secondary school”.



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Question 2:

What do you think your involvement as a parent should be?

Some parents called for regular updates from schools on what is being taught to enable them to complement this / build on this through activities in the home. It was suggested that reports be provided to parents on a weekly basis outlining what is being covered in school. Moreover, it was recommended that such information be provided to parents in advance, so that they are aware of the topics that children are learning about and are prepared to provide responses /clarifications, as necessary. Whilst it was acknowledged that many parents already try to extend children's learning in SEE (i.e. promoting an awareness and appreciation of the natural world, drawing attention to seasonal change, encouraging children to engage in outdoor activities, more information and guidance for parents would be welcome.

It was stated that identifying meaningful connections between children's learning and their lived experience is important and one parent referred to the upcoming Olympic Games and the potential for children to develop knowledge relevant to SEE (Geography and History) when watching coverage of the Olympics. It was noted that there is also scope to develop literacy / oral language skills and knowledge associated with Arts Education (e.g. different symbols, cultures, dance, song etc.)



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MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES



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Question 1: Name one thing you think is important in this subject area.

Learning a language of interest:

Some parents stated that their children should be learning languages that they are interested in. Such languages should be useful and functional. One parent recognised learning Irish is a nice idea but questioned the usefulness of the subject in the long run. While some parents noted that choosing a language that children can practise will be important, they stated that the relevance of the language in the lives of children is as important, especially when it comes to languages like French, German and Spanish. Some parents also recognised that ‘hard languages to learn’ can be important too – as this will help build resilience in students.

Time management for Modern Foreign Languages (MFL):

Some parents expressed the view that Irish dominates a lot of the time in the week along with English and Maths. They expressed the need to introduce other languages early on, while finding ways to manage time allocation within the classroom and week. Some parents suggested that there should be a place for all languages. One way to start learning a foreign language, they suggested, is by being exposed to the music and cultures of the community speaking that language. For instance, they suggested that on a specific week, the school could select the language for immersion throughout the week – including music, culture, stories, customs, food and dress. This will bring a mix of cultures and a celebration of a particular language.



Newcomers as a source of knowledge:

Some parents stated that MFL at primary school can support integration of children in schools with a diverse population. For example, Ukrainian children coming to Irish primary schools could be an opportunity for Irish communities to learn about this group of children, their language, and their community. It is a way to enrich all children's experiences by sharing their language with Irish students. While newcomers to Ireland can remain within their own community, MFL learning, in the view of these parents, could help children share their language outside their community. Some parents note that awareness of languages is important. These parents think it can be empowering for a child to teach their peers about a language they know.

Learning a Language early:

Some parents stressed that there is a benefit of learning a language early. They stated that learning a language later can be a struggle – the earlier the better. There was an example given of the teaching of Spanish in a local primary school in junior infants. The majority of parents noted that it would be good to see more foreign languages being taught in some schools. They believe that the child's mind works differently to adults – it is more malleable, and it is growing and building knowledge. Some parents think that if a child begins learning the language early, then that will be most beneficial.



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Methods of Teaching:

Some parents stated that early immersion in Irish can support a love of the language. In addition, one parent suggested that an Irish programme like RTE Junior works well and can support interest in the language. This also supports the culture around the language. One parent highlighted the need for explaining ‘why’ the learning is taking place is important – ‘why’ is it good to learn a language (Irish and MFL). Some parents noted that children should be able to cultivate confidence in their study of languages - not being afraid to make mistakes, which are part of the learning process.

Additional Support for Non-Irish parents:

Non-Irish parents stated that they could not help their children with their Irish learning, especially that the books do not come home so they don't know how to help. This left them, they added, feeling confused as to how to help their children. It was stated that parents need help to support their children in learning Irish while at home. Non-Irish parents expressed how important it is for them to keep children's native tongue and culture. For some parents, they noted that their children were coming home and using the Irish language in their household, where the parents do not speak Irish. Other parents stated that their children benefited from the additional support provided in the learning of English. They suggested that the same additional support should be extended to the learning of Irish.

Qualified teachers:

Many parents stressed the need for qualified teachers to teach MFL. They also highlighted the need for Continuous Professional Development for teachers and incorporating this into the introduction for MFL.



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Question 2:

What do you think your involvement as a parent should be?

Consulting parents:

Some parents stated it is important to consult parents before MFLs are chosen. With MFL being a new subject in schools, parents noted that they may not be able to support children with this learning and they may not have the competence themselves. That is why they suggested that knowing what is going on in school is important. Some parents also noted that the foreign language teacher scheme in post-primary schools works well and wondered if that could be mirrored at primary level.

Experiencing language as a way of Learning:

According to a small group of parents, they have a responsibility to encourage children in ways that exposes them to languages. Pen pals still happen – this often leads to travel also. Parents noted that with Ireland being close to Europe, connections are easier to build than in other parts of the world.



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WELL BEING

(PHYSICAL EDUCATION – PE; AND
SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND HEALTH
EDUCATION – SPHE)



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Question 1: Name one thing you think is important in this subject area:

Health and Wellbeing:

Some parents emphasised the link between mental and physical health. They supported the idea of educating children about diet and physical activity for their wellbeing. Some parents also stated that they had concerns about the appropriateness of certain topics in Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) and their impact on children's mental health.

Developmental Appropriateness:

According to some parents, there is a need for aligning educational content with the developmental stages of children. From the viewpoint of these parents, their children may not critically analyse information and easily accept what adults tell them. For instance, parents gave the example of the introduction of topics like gender identity and sexual education at a young age. These parents stated that they want evidence to support the effectiveness of exposing children to such topics. They further noted that when it comes to topics involving sexual education, they need to be asked for consent.



Parental Involvement:

Some parents expressed interest in more parental involvement and transparency in curriculum development. They said it is important for them to be informed about what their children are being taught. They also commented that teachers seem to have too much autonomy in decision-making while parental involvement remains very minimal. They asked for improved communication with parents about curriculum content and changes. They also asked for workshops and face-to-face meetings to gather parental input and ensure they are well informed.

Curriculum Clarity and Content:

According to a small group of parents, the new curriculum is vague compared to the 1999 curriculum, making it hard to discern specific teaching requirements. They noted that toolkits should be available, so that they are aware of the specifics of what their children will be taught. They acknowledged the challenges teachers face in adhering to the curriculum, while wanting the best for children, but further noted having concerns about them making decisions that parents feel they should be making themselves.

Diverse Family Situations:

According to some parents, the curriculum should reflect diverse family structures and situations to be inclusive and supportive of all children.



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Question 2:

What do you think your involvement as a parent should be?

Ensure Curriculum Consistency and Clarity:

According to some parents, there is a need to develop clear and consistent guidelines for what should be taught across all schools to avoid variability based on individual teachers' or schools' values and worldviews.

Introduce Sensitive Topics at Appropriate Ages:

According to some parents, the introduction of topics like sex education and gender identity should be delayed until at least the sixth class. These parents call for consideration of the developmental stage of children and respect cultural differences in the timing of these topics.

Review and Adjust SPHE Content:

A small group of parents expressed the view that a distinction should be made between sex education and broader discussions of sexuality. They mentioned concerns about the incorporation of ideas around gender and sexuality into school curricula.

Reevaluate the Role of Religious Education:

Some parents stated that concerns about religious education should be addressed, and they questioned whether it should remain part of the school curriculum or be taught separately.



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Carefully Integrate Social Justice Themes:

According to one parent, the integration of social justice themes should be approached with caution.

Support Parents with Information and Resources:

Many parents told us they want to be provided with advance notice and resources about the curriculum, especially for SPHE, to help them prepare and support their children.



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KEY COMPETENCIES



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The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes introducing seven key competencies to equip children with the essential knowledge, skills, concepts, dispositions, attitudes and values which enable them to adapt and deal with a range of situations, challenges and contexts. The seven competencies are:

- Being well
- Being a digital learner
- Being mathematical
- Being a communicator and using language
- Being creative
- Being an active learner
- Being an active citizen



We asked parents two questions:

Q1 How important is it for you as a parent that your child will gain these skills and abilities, which are known as competencies?

&

Q.2 How do you think these competencies could be included within these subject areas?

Parents had a wide range of views on the key competencies. Firstly, there were some views expressed regarding the decision to include these competencies at an early stage of the re-development of the primary curriculum. Some parents were of the view that there should be an opportunity at a later stage to consider the key competencies in the context of the redeveloped specifications for the five broad curriculum areas. (NPC and NCCA representatives explained that the seven key competencies are already included within curriculum policy as they are within the Primary Curriculum Framework).

These parents expressed a level of dissatisfaction (and frustration) that the key competencies are not open to review or discussion.



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Secondly, it was acknowledged that some of these competencies are supported within the existing primary school curriculum, and it would be prudent to look at how they are being achieved at present to build on the strengths of the 1999 curriculum and children's current experiences, and to identify gaps / scope for improvement. In addition, it was noted that some of the terminology used within the section on key competencies was too complex and advanced for children at primary school level.

There was some discussion also regarding children who are high achievers. There were calls for more support and appropriate learning opportunities for them, at their level. A number of attendees drew on their personal experiences of this where their children feel "bored" at school and called for a more explicit focus for those who have a high level of attainment in a particular area. One suggestion was that regional programmes could be developed / partnerships between a network of schools.

The remaining comments can be recorded under the heading of the some of the competencies.



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Being an Active Citizen:

Some parents said promoting activism is not appropriate for young children at primary school level. They questioned who made the decision that children should be active citizens. It was noted that the focus on promoting 'social justice' and some of the language around 'being an active citizen' is "dragging children into the adult world".

Some parents indicated that they do not want the curriculum to promote activism – they feel that children should be armed with facts and make decisions to be activists in certain areas, later in life. It was argued that engaging in activism must be of an individual's own choosing rather than being "forced upon them" and "to be capable of being an active citizen you need to be capable of critical thought".

Concern was raised about the political dimension of 'being an active citizen', there was a view that teaching at primary level should be fact-based, and the teacher should remain neutral. One parent commented that they "do not want my children to be warriors" and they do not want political ideology being associated with 'being an active citizen'.

Many parents feel it is their role to instil values in their children.

One attendee made the comment that the competency of 'Being an active citizen' may not be inclusive as it does not reflect the increased number of neurodiverse children who may be withdrawn or children with an introverted disposition who may not feel comfortable speaking out / engage in activism.



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Being a digital learner:

Concern was raised at the emphasis on digital technology across the specifications as it was stated that excess use of technology has an adverse impact on young children. Parents spoke about their efforts to reduce children's use of digital devices and that this approach will be at odds with the promotion of digital tools as advocated within the redeveloped primary curriculum. There was a discussion about the use of textbooks and how this might be replaced by technology. It was stated that there is still a need for textbooks to ensure that the basics of literacy and numeracy are taught and that children learn about how things work, how electricity is used etc.

Being an active learner:

The inclusion of active learning and being outdoors was welcomed as some parents commented that this supports children's natural sense of wonder, awe, and inquisitiveness. Field trips and field work in SEE was also welcomed.

It was noted that critical thinking is a key component of being an active learner



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Being well:

Some parents expressed some concern at the language of the competency of 'Being well' as they indicated that it is difficult to measure 'wellness' and 'being well' will be different for different people (influenced by a variety of factors). There was a view that 'competency' may not be the correct word in this instance. The question was asked "how do you define 'being well'?" Moreover, a question was raised as to whether a child who "is not well" is failing if 'being well' is listed as a key competency.

There was concern also around teaching children about controversial topics in primary school (such as climate change). Some parents commented that this would negatively impact the wellbeing of their children.

One attendee expressed the view that 'being well' and 'being a digital learner' contradict each other and emphasised the importance of promoting healthy use of digital learning.



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