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Subject:

SPECIALIST SCHOOLS: COHORT 3

Circular Number: DE 2008/04

Date of Issue: 10 March 2008

Target Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided post-primary schools and special schools with secondary departments;
- Education and Library Boards;
- Further and Higher Education Colleges;
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta;
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education;
- Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment;
- General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland; and
- Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team.

Summary of Contents:

This circular, issued by the Department of Education, details the arrangements for schools wishing to participate in the third year of the Specialist Schools Programme. The circular describes the application and approval process for September 2008 designation, including the timescales for applications and decisions.

Enquiries:

Any enquiries about the content of this Circular should be addressed to:

Jill Caldwell
14-19 Team
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

Governor Awareness: Essential

Status of Contents:

For information and action by schools

Related Documents:

Annex "Year 3 Specialist Schools Application Guidance" Document

Expiry Date: N/A

DE Website: <http://www.deni.gov.uk>

DE: Tel: 028 9127 9888

Fax: 028 9127 9100

Additional Copies can be obtained
from Tel: 028 9127 9889

Introduction

1. This circular has been prepared by the Department of Education (DE) to outline the arrangements and application process for schools seeking designation as a Specialist School from September 2008.
2. The core objectives of the Specialist School concept in Northern Ireland remain essentially unchanged for the third year of the pilot programme:
 - To provide opportunities for pupils to benefit from wider learning experiences and to ensure maximum impact of the available expertise and resources, by promoting co-operation and collaboration among schools and between schools and other providers of education and training for 14-19 year-olds;
 - To provide parents with greater choice among a range of schools, which have differing areas of focus;
 - To raise standards and realise performance improvement for all young people; and
 - To develop links between schools, their local communities and the economy to ensure that all young people are given a strong foundation for lifelong learning and work.

Context

3. The specialist programme is an integral element of the overarching Raising Standards and School Improvement agenda and, in the coming years, its role as a key connector in linking the ongoing education reforms is set to increase. In the third year of the Specialist Schools programme, DE is keen to embed the programme within the broader framework of 14-19 provision and in the changing educational landscape that children will have access to over the coming years through the ongoing work to implement the Entitlement Framework.

Learning Communities

4. Schools across the North are already working with other schools and with colleges of further education in the development of Learning Communities to plan and co-ordinate collaborative provision (particularly for 14-19 pupils) in a coherent way. The development of these Learning Communities will complement the wider development of area-based planning within education. It is within this context and structure that DE wishes to see the specialist schools programme develop, linking the ongoing reforms and supporting and extending local collaboration.
5. Schools should consider seeking specialist designation where they have a particular curricular strength in one of the listed Specialist areas and are actively seeking to raise standards in the specialism through further developing that strength, not only within the school but also in post primary schools within the learning community and in their partner primary schools. It is essential, therefore, that schools ensure that their specialist plans are entirely complementary with the plans and strategies for the development of their respective Learning Communities.

STEM

6. It is widely recognised that for the economy of the North to grow and compete in an increasingly global market that we will need to enhance the uptake of STEM subjects in schools. In the Programme for Government promotion of STEM related activities is a very high priority. To take this agenda forward DE, working with DETI, have identified resources within the Innovation Fund to support the STEM agenda through the Specialist Schools programme.
7. DE recognises the potential that specialist schools could have in the promotion of STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and applications are particularly welcomed from schools under the STEM specialisms, i.e.:

- **SCIENCE**
- **MATHEMATICS**
- **TECHNOLOGY**
- **MATHEMATICS AND COMPUTING**

While the Department hopes to designate a number of STEM specialists, it should be noted that, as with all other specialisms, decisions will be made based on the quality of the application.

8. More information on the context of the Specialist Schools Programme, how it is evolving, the criteria for designation and detailed guidance on completion of the application can be found in the Annex to this Circular “Year 3 Specialist Schools Application Guidance”.
9. A number of changes have been made to the application process for the third year of the pilot and schools should familiarise themselves with this revised document before beginning their application.
10. Schools wishing to complete an application should contact the Department of Education at the address below. A copy of the application form will be forwarded by e-mail.

Specialist Schools Pilot
14-19 Team
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Bangor
BT19 7PR

Email: 14-19team@deni.gov.uk

11. The closing date for receipt of Specialist Schools applications will be **NOON ON FRIDAY 2 MAY**.
12. As in previous years, an independent panel will consider all of the specialist applications and will advise the Department as to which applications meet the criteria for specialist designation as detailed in the guidance.

13. DE hopes to designate between 10 and 15 new specialist schools including those from the STEM specialist areas, effective from September 2008. However, as with previous years, schools should note that final decisions on designation will be taken on an individual basis, based on the quality of the applications received, and that only schools demonstrating the capacity to take the programme forward will be designated.

14. **DE will be responsible for making the final decisions on designation and schools will be notified of the Department's decisions by 30 May 2008.**

15. The Department hopes to announce any future application rounds for the Specialist Programme earlier in the respective school years.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lorraine Finlay". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping 'L' and 'F'.

Lorraine Finlay

14-19 Team