

19 June 2007

Dear Primary Principal

PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' CONFERENCE – CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT ISSUES

I am grateful to all those who were able to attend the conference on 24 May in Armagh City Hotel, to which all primary principals were invited. For those of you who were unable to make it, presentations are available via www.deni.gov.uk, under Curriculum and Assessment.

A number of important issues were dealt with at the conference, both by the Minister for Education, Caítriona Ruane, and other speakers. I therefore felt that it would be useful for everyone if I record the main points and the assurances that were given in relation to the implementation of the revised curriculum and assessment arrangements and set out the way ahead:

1. The implementation is a phased one, commencing in September 2007, and the first year will be considered a transitional year. In terms of the curriculum, transitional means that we do not expect everything to be in place during the first year. In 2007-8 schools should begin to put the revised curriculum in place for Years 1 and 5 and to plan ahead for implementation for subsequent year groups on a Key Stage basis. The Department does not expect all schools in this transition year, however, to have all the elements in place nor to have their planning for each Key Stage fully completed. It is necessary for legislative purposes that the curriculum is formally triggered for successive year groups of pupils but we recognise that, in practice, schools will move progressively to full implementation by 2010. To help schools in doing so, the statutory Minimum Content, previously notified to you, is now available via the Curriculum and Assessment section of the DE website. As they plan and implement the curriculum, schools can continue to draw on the former Programmes of Study, or amend them, or begin afresh. The key is that the curriculum is in place for all primary children in June 2010 and that you plan this change in the most appropriate way for your school.

2. The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor the implementation by evaluating the support for Years 1, 5 and 8 teachers, by visiting INSET for Years 2 and 6 (and 9) teachers and by undertaking district visits to observe progress.
3. An additional £3m will be provided in 2007/08 for resources to support the introduction of the Foundation Stage curriculum. This will be allocated according to the number of Year 1 classes and specific allocations will be notified to schools by September 2007.
4. The Minister announced that over 20,000 new laptops will be provided across nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools during the 2007/08 school year. In addition, over 5,000 laptops will be provided specifically to support computer-based assessment (INCAS). Primary schools will be given primacy in the provision of the laptops to support classroom practice and assessment arrangements. The additional machines to support computer-based assessment will be provided in September and we expect the remaining 20,000 laptops to be delivered between October and April 2008. The laptops for primary schools are in addition to over 13,000 new computers being provided to them as part of the 'Lot 6' refresh, which will be rolled out to schools by December. Even allowing for the fact that the new equipment will enable some older machines to be taken out of use, we estimate that the computer: pupil ratio in primary schools will improve from 1:9 to about 1:5.
5. In terms of assessment, the 2007/8 school year is likewise seen as a transitional year. Schools will be required to run INCAS in the first term but will not be required to report the outcomes formally to parents. Nor will the outcomes be centrally collated for that year. The first year is about schools getting used to running the INCAS assessment. It is planned that teachers will have additional training on INCAS during the year to assist them in interpreting the outcomes, recognising their diagnostic purpose and in guiding their subsequent teaching. From 2008/09 schools will report the outcomes formally to parents and to the centre for the relevant year groups.
6. Schools will not have to report to parents using Levels of Progression until 2009/10. In the meantime, there will be consultation with teachers on the level descriptors and trialling to ensure they are meaningful and manageable.
7. Schools should continue to offer meetings to parents at which they report pupil progress and at the end of the year complete a Pupil Profile for Y1 and Y5 pupils, with the help of the computer comment banks if schools wish to use them. Teachers will receive training in how to use the report writer to complete the Pupil Profile and we would strongly encourage schools to use the full Pupil Profile format, available on the revised curriculum website (www.nicurriculum.org.uk), for use in reporting to parents of Year 5 pupils. In the transitional phase, schools already have the flexibility to start to adapt their existing reporting arrangements to reflect the structure of the revised curriculum.
8. Irish Medium schools will have access to INCAS but have the choice to complete the literacy module or not, given that pupils in these schools will only recently have commenced formal bi-lingual education by the time they are in Year 5. The Department is working with CCEA and CnaG to develop a more appropriate literacy assessment tool. The voice-over for the numeracy module will be provided in Irish.

9. There will be ongoing training for principals and teachers to build on what has been delivered already. Principals were invited to put forward views on how they would like to see this support delivered next year. The provision of the 5 + 5 professional development days (i.e. 5 exceptional closure days in addition to the normal 'Baker' days) will continue for the next three years to support principals in leading the implementation within their school. The Department will also be issuing a leaflet to parents early in September to explain what the changes will mean for their child.

10. The Minister is also keen to extend breadth through the revised curriculum and is seeking ways to encourage sport and languages for those schools who may wish to develop these.

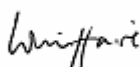
Conclusion

The Programme Management Board will be considering in particular how they can meet your needs in the coming year.

At the Armagh conference a number of you suggested to me that you would find value in having such events on an annual basis. I am considering carefully how to promote a more effective dialogue with principals while maintaining the Standing Conference system. I will be thinking further about this and discussing how this is best arranged. This will also be important as we move towards the Education and Skills Authority, since we want to ensure that its systems meet the particular needs of the primary sector.

As other decisions which impact on the primary sector are made by Caítriona Ruane we will also seek to ensure that we pass information to you as soon as we can.

Yours sincerely,



WILL HAIRE