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Subject:

SPECIALIST SCHOOLS: COHORT 4

Circular Number: DE 2008/23

Date of Issue: 21 November 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 fourth year of the Specialist Schools Programme. The circular describes the application and approval process for September 2009 designation, including the timescales for applications and decisions.

Enquiries:

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

David Gibson
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 4 Specialist Schools Application Guidance" Document

Expiry Date: N/A

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

DE: Tel: 028 9127 9956

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 2009.
2. The core objectives of the Specialist School concept here remain essentially unchanged for the fourth year of the 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 fourth 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 outcome of the Entitlement Framework.

Area Learning Communities

4. Schools 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. Progress is being made with a growing number of schools now engaged in innovative and creative approaches to collaborative working and this represents a culture change. There are currently 30 Area Learning Communities(ALC) established across all ELB areas within which schools, FE Colleges and other providers are working to increase the range of courses for pupils in local areas. The development of these Area 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 agreed action plans and strategies for the development of their respective Area Learning Communities.

STEM

6. It is widely recognised that, for the local economy to grow and compete in an increasingly global market, we will need to enhance the uptake of STEM subjects in schools. In the Programme for Government, promotion of STEM related activities is therefore afforded a high priority and there is widespread agreement on the need for action to be taken to highlight STEM career opportunities and to ensure that, within schools, the teaching and learning of science, technology and maths is planned and delivered in a way that is relevant and enjoyable and that encourages young people to take up courses of study (both general and applied) in STEM-related areas. In response to that acknowledgement, DE has again been able to access funding from the Innovation Fund to support the STEM agenda through the Specialist Schools programme.

• DE recognises the potential that specialist schools could have in the promotion of STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and therefore is particularly seeking applications from schools under the STEM specialisms with the aim of designating more schools as STEM-specialist schools in the following areas:

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

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.

7. 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 “Year 4 Specialist Schools Application Guidance” available on the DE website.

8. 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 Programme
14-19 Team
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Bangor
BT19 7PR

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

9. The closing date for receipt of Specialist Schools applications will be **NOON ON FRIDAY 27 February 2009.**
10. 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.
11. DE hopes to designate between 10 and 15 new specialist schools including those from the STEM specialist areas, effective from September 2009. 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.
12. **DE will be responsible for making the final decisions on designation and schools will be notified of the Department's decisions by 30 March 2009.**
13. The Department hopes to announce any future application rounds for the Specialist Schools Programme earlier in the respective school years.



Lorraine Finlay

14-19 Team