

Primary Developments: Consultation on Curriculum Structure and Time

Executive summary of final report

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Introduction

The Primary Curriculum was published in 1999 and has underpinned teaching and learning in schools across the country since then. There have been many successes as well as challenges with the curriculum which are documented in curriculum reviews, evaluations and national and international assessments. The past number of years have seen significant changes and adjustments in Irish society, the economy and its education system. 'Change' was and always will be a constant feature in all our lives including those of our children, both in and out of school. In looking at early childhood and primary education, the pace and scope of this change has been substantial. This is due, in part, to increased demands and higher expectations from parents, wider society and policy-makers about what education can and should do in supporting children's and young people's learning and development in the 21st century.

At curriculum level, recent years have brought calls for increased time to be allocated to existing areas such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), and requests for the inclusion of new curriculum areas such as Coding, Modern Languages, and Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) issued an open invitation in 2011 to all interested individuals and organisations to have their say about priorities for a primary curriculum. An analysis of responses highlighted six key priorities with these mirroring, in broad terms, the priorities within *Aistear* and the then draft Junior Cycle Framework, as well as spotlighting ways in which the current curriculum could be improved. Late 2009 saw the publication of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and from 2014, the phased introduction of a new junior cycle experience in lower secondary education. Both curriculum developments reflect key changes in education policy and ultimately, new experiences for young children and for students, necessitating greater curriculum alignment and continuity across all phases in the Irish education system from early childhood through to senior cycle.

For these reasons and others which are fully detailed in the final consultation report, the NCCA published proposals in December 2016 related to 'structure' and 'time allocations' in the primary curriculum. These were the basis for an extensive consultation from January to June 2017. This consultation has been an important first opportunity, in almost twenty years, to 'check in' with the current primary curriculum and to question, debate and reflect on the extent to which it is still fit-for-purpose as we approach the third decade of the 21st century. Two sets of proposals informed the consultation: (1) how the primary school curriculum should be 'structured' and (2) how 'time' might

be used across the curriculum into the future. The consultation also provided a lens to explore wider aspects of curriculum—the implementation process, the system’s role in enabling and supporting change in teaching and learning, the school’s role in enabling and supporting change, and the centrality of high-quality continuing professional development. A range of consultation formats were used including a major consultative conference in Dublin Castle. The findings from this consultation will inform and support the next phase of work in redeveloping the Irish primary school curriculum.

This short document sets out a synopsis of the key findings across the consultation, and briefly describes the next phase of work by the NCCA. The rationale for reviewing and redeveloping the primary curriculum, the consultation formats and the main themes generated from the data analysis of responses are presented in greater detail in the final report, *Primary Developments: Consultation on Curriculum Structure and Time* at www.ncca.ie/en/primary/primary-developments.

Beginning on page 9, the final report provides a detailed rationale for curriculum review and redevelopment.

Consultation proposals

The first set of proposals presented two options, both using the concept of an **incremental stage model**, for how a redeveloped **primary curriculum might be structured** (see Appendix 1). Both options encompassed the two years of the *Early Childhood Care and Education Programme*. Included in the proposals was a suggestion to move away from subjects in early primary replacing them with themes such as those in *Aistear* or with broad curriculum areas, leading into subjects in later primary school. The proposed stages marked, in very broad terms, changes in children's learning and development. The options were not exhaustive and were intended to stimulate discussion about the most appropriate structure for the primary curriculum when we think of the next five, ten years and beyond. A range of questions were considered during the consultation in relation to both options.

The second set of proposals presented a **differentiated approach to thinking about, and using 'time' in the school day** (see Appendix 2). These proposals built on schools' experience with the suggested weekly time framework in the 1999 curriculum while also reflecting trends and developments internationally. A new approach to time allocation is intended to better meet children's learning needs, and the needs of teachers and schools in terms of planning, teaching and assessing. It intends to provide teachers with greater flexibility in their use of teaching time to meet the needs of children and the school community. The proposed time allocation model can work with either revised structures for the primary curriculum. The model uses two categories of time rather than the three categories presented in the Primary School Curriculum¹. The two proposed categories were Minimum State Curriculum Time and Flexible Time. A range of questions were considered during the consultation to explore these proposals.

¹ The framework for time in the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) includes three key elements:

- time allocated to the teaching of the patron's programme
- a suggested minimum time allocation for each of the other six curriculum areas, along with a period of discretionary curriculum time
- time allowed for breaks and assembly.

Formats of consultation

The consultation used a range of formats to support constructive and thorough engagement with educators, children, parents and members of the public about the proposals on curriculum structure and time:

- Bilateral meetings with stakeholders
- Consultative conference
- Consultative meetings with children
- Online questionnaire
- Teacher focus groups
- Written submissions.

The consultation began in January 2017 and finished in early June. During this time, 33 bilateral meetings were held with a wide range of interest groups. A consultative conference took place on March 28th in Dublin Castle and was attended by 190 delegates. Children were invited to share their thoughts on curriculum content and pedagogy. A total of 2,084 online questionnaire responses were received and seven teacher focus groups took place between February 15th and March 15th involving 48 teachers and principals. Finally, 107 written submissions were received by post and online.

Beginning on page 14, the final report describes the formats of consultation in detail. A full list of written submissions received for publication is set out on pages 104-108.

Summary of main themes from the consultation

The final report describes, in detail, the main findings from each individual consultation format—bilateral meetings, consultative conference, consultative meetings with children, online questionnaires, teacher focus groups, and written submissions. This executive summary simply provides the main themes across the formats.

Structure of a redeveloped primary curriculum

Five main themes emerged in response to the proposals on curriculum structure. These are summarised below.

1. There was **positivity and support for a single curriculum stage encompassing the two preschool years and the two infant classes**. This was evident regardless of preference for a two- or three-stage curriculum structure. A single stage across the early years was considered important in supporting the continuity of children’s learning experiences from one educational setting to the next. Respondents noted the opportunity for greater connectedness between preschool and primary education. Nonetheless, a number of practical concerns were raised. These included references to differences between preschools and primary schools in relation to pupil/teacher ratios and the minimum levels of qualifications required by practitioners and teachers.
2. There was broad **agreement for using a more integrated curriculum structure for infant classes**. A richer and more holistic curriculum model was considered more developmentally appropriate for children at this stage in their learning and development; better supporting children’s oral language development, enabling child-led play while promoting positive and effective transitions from preschool to primary school. A more integrated and thematic curriculum structure was also thought to benefit planning for teachers of junior and senior infants. There was recognition of the current challenge of using a play pedagogy in a subject-based curriculum in the infant classes, and challenges associated with resources and access to CPD.

3. Many respondents were of the view that **subjects should continue to hold an important position in the primary school curriculum**. A strong majority agreed that a subject-based approach in the later years of primary school could help children transition into post-primary school by facilitating alignment in curricula. There was less consensus, however, as to when subjects should appear in the curriculum. There was some concern that their introduction in 5th class may be too late with some suggesting this should happen as early as 1st class. There was clear messaging that Arts Education, Physical Education (PE), Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) should not be diluted or squeezed out of a redeveloped primary school curriculum.
4. There was **greater support for the three-stage model than for the two-stage model**; it was viewed as a natural and progressive continuum of education. For many, the three-stage model was considered more developmentally and pedagogically appropriate. Respondents also felt there was a natural progression from themes to curriculum areas to subjects. Respondents referenced the benefits of thematic and integrated approaches, natural progression between the stages, and continuity in children's learning. In considering the two-stage model, there were some concerns about the length of time for each stage and the belief that it could be difficult for children to transition from a thematic curriculum approach in Stage 1 to a subject-based curriculum in Stage 2.
5. The **practical challenges** of implementing a two- or three-stage incremental model **in small primary schools with multi-grade classrooms** were recognised. Some respondents favoured the two-stage model for teaching and learning in a small school while others favoured the three-stage model. Others again felt that neither model was practical or manageable due to pedagogical and organisational issues in a multi-grade setting.

Time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum

Four main themes emerged in response to the proposals on time. These are summarised below.

1. There was **support for changing how time is allocated across the curriculum**. While highlighting that guidance and support on how best to implement these changes at school level would be essential, there was a recognition that the current allocations need reconfiguration. The existing model of time allocation in schools means that children may have a fragmented experience of the curriculum with a large number of subjects sharing a

relatively small amount of time and perhaps therefore, resulting in a disjointed learning experience. There was an acknowledgement, however, that the introduction of a new time allocation model, without a review of the curriculum itself, would not resolve the issue of an overcrowded primary school curriculum.

2. There was **strong support for schools having greater flexibility in deciding how time is allocated in the curriculum**. Respondents expressed the view that these decisions, made at a local level, could better reflect the context of each individual school. Teachers felt they were well placed to allocate time in classes and schools. Increased flexibility could provide for more creative teaching, thematic planning and project-based learning that better reflect the needs, interests and capabilities of children. More flexibility for schools in deciding how time is allocated was viewed as demonstrating greater confidence in the teaching profession.
3. There was **general agreement for the proposal of two categories of time allocation**. The suggested 60:40 ratio of time for Minimum State Curriculum Time and Flexible Time was met with a positive response. Within Minimum State Curriculum Time, the weekly time allocations for Language and Mathematics were viewed as appropriate while the monthly allocations for the remainder of the curriculum were seen as enabling more age-appropriate pedagogies in the classroom. The term 'Flexible Time' was questioned across the consultation formats. Some respondents felt it may not be as flexible as the 40% would suggest, so perhaps a different term may be needed. The inclusion of breaks and recreation time, and to a greater extent the patron's programme within Flexible Time was questioned. It is considered that Flexible Time recognises the professional autonomy of schools and teachers and could help to alleviate existing time pressures on schools.
4. As the 1999 curriculum assigns time to each subject, albeit a suggested time, there were **concerns that in a redeveloped primary curriculum, some subjects may 'lose out' in a review of how time is allocated**. How best to plan for flexible time to ensure consistency and maintain a balance that will meet children's needs, while protecting subjects from either neglect or excessive attention, was highlighted. Some form of guidance to support the use of a new curriculum time allocation was considered necessary by respondents.

Other ideas from the consultation

The consultation also provided a platform for expressing views, opinions and responses to wider educational issues. Some of the other ideas and insights that came through the data analysis are mentioned below.

1. The **proposals for consultation, while welcomed by many, were viewed by some as a deviation from the existing clear and structured primary curriculum.** A deeper interrogation of the reasons why the existing curriculum requires review was requested. Signposting a clear articulation of the aims, principles and key theories of learning underpinning a redeveloped curriculum would also be beneficial.
2. Respondents noted that any revision to the curriculum structure and time allocations would **mean a cultural change for the school community, requiring a change in teachers' mindset and pedagogical approaches.** Everyone involved in the primary school system (children, parents, teachers, management, support services) will need time to familiarise themselves with these changes. Respondents commented that change would need to be introduced in a focused and developmental way and that the curriculum developer (NCCA) would need to 'remain close' to the new curriculum's introduction and implementation in schools.
3. The **development and provision of CPD to support this change was considered essential.** Analysis showed a need to incorporate a variety of approaches and supports for CPD from different providers. Calls were made for this to be accessible to all teachers across the continuum of their careers. The following were the most frequently mentioned areas of learning for teachers and principals:
 - understanding and appreciating the aims and principles of a new curriculum
 - learning how to incorporate new and innovative pedagogical approaches (including play-based and child-led learning) into their teaching
 - planning, developing and implementing an integrated curriculum through themes / curriculum areas / subjects
 - embedding the use of weekly and monthly time allocations and flexible time into planning processes.

4. The **great potential within the proposals for considering a full restructuring of a child's primary school experience possibly linking key skills at junior cycle to *Aistear***, was noted by respondents. Some also commented on the opportunity to consider aspects like the physical school building, layout of classrooms, and the length of the school day for children. The curriculum is only one piece of the puzzle! This linked with calls for system change as well as curriculum change. However, the financing and resourcing of change was a concern for many. Respondents felt that the costs of resources, personnel, infrastructure and modifications to school buildings would influence the outcome of a new curriculum model. They questioned if sufficient resources would be forthcoming to implement the curriculum proposals in full.
5. The **inclusion of children was considered a strength of the consultation**, with groups and individuals commenting on the importance of children's active participation in, and contribution to, shaping a future primary curriculum. Respondents expressed the view that further useful information could be gleaned by actively listening to children and hearing about their experiences of school.
6. The **central role of parents in children's primary education was highlighted**. Alongside this, respondents acknowledged the challenge for schools in helping parents to understand the benefit of new and different teaching and learning approaches used in schools.

The next phase of work

As noted, the consultation provided the first opportunity, in almost twenty years, for those interested in primary education to consider the structure of the curriculum and how time is allocated within it. While the consultation proposals focused largely on structural and organisational aspects of the curriculum, they stimulated discussion on a wider range of themes which while not directly associated with the Council's work in redeveloping the primary curriculum, nonetheless, are of critical importance in considering, planning for, and supporting implementation of that curriculum. This concluding section presents an outline of the next phase of the NCCA's work in reviewing and redeveloping the primary curriculum.

Children spend eight years in primary school in Ireland—more years than in any other education phase/sector and the primary curriculum aims to support them during their childhood as a time in its own right and into a future which is relatively unknown and likely to be incomparable, in many respects, to today's world. To put this in more concrete terms, children born in 2018 and who begin primary school in September 2022/2023, will begin their working lives in the fifth decade of this century and retire in the late 2080s. The question about the type of primary curriculum we choose to develop for children now and for the years ahead is an all-important one; it says much about our image of primary teachers and children in Ireland today and our understandings and assumptions about our children's future world. The key findings from the recent consultation on curriculum structure and time together with previous work by the NCCA such as the identification of priorities for a primary curriculum (2012), and an extensive body of research, will help to shape the next phase of work on the primary curriculum. This phase will centre chiefly on the development of an overview of a redeveloped curriculum which will be the focus of further public consultation in 2019.

An overview of a redeveloped curriculum

Drawing on the experience of developing *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and, more recently, the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015), the draft overview will respond to a number of key questions about a curriculum some of which emerged during the consultation on structure and time. These include, although are not confined to, the following.

- **Purpose**—while the consultation discussions indicated a continuing relevance for the three broad aims of the primary curriculum², there was a call to clarify the contribution a redeveloped curriculum should make to a child’s educational journey, taking account of policy developments in early childhood and at junior cycle.
- **Values and principles**—the increasingly diverse nature of the student population in our primary schools was reflected in many discussions during the consultation. This rich diversity necessitates a clear articulation of values in a redeveloped curriculum and of the principles that underpin it ensuring that the curriculum is for *all* children, catering for the full richness of diversity and the full scope of additional needs.
- **Overarching priorities**—since the primary curriculum was published in 1999, there have been key curriculum developments in early childhood, junior and senior cycle. While these have been sectoral, they have shared a number of broad, overarching skills/competencies—developing children’s wellbeing, communication, critical and creative thinking, their capacity to work with others, and their literacy and numeracy skills—as well as priorities related to the development of dispositions, knowledge and understanding, values and attitudes. The redevelopment of the primary curriculum brings an opportunity to identify what it is that the curriculum, as a whole, aims to do for children.
- **Pedagogical approaches**—the consultation proposals highlighted the acceleration of research, in recent years, on children’s learning and development and the significance of this for understanding more fully *how* all children can be supported in their learning. A redeveloped primary curriculum provides an opportunity to identify and describe effective pedagogical approaches that work across the curriculum, and perhaps, that are especially significant at particular points in a child’s primary school years.
- **Curriculum structure**—the consultation findings signalled widespread support for an integrated curriculum for children in the early years of primary and the importance of retaining subjects, at least in the later years. Respondents, overall, indicated somewhat greater support for a three-stage model over a two-stage model while others questioned the potential departure from the current four-stage model. In exploring further the concept of an

² The three general aims of the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) are to

- enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual
- enable the child to develop as a social being through living and cooperating with others and so contribute to the good of society
- prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning. (p.7 - http://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/c4a88a62-7818-4bb2-bb18-4c4ad37bc255/PSEC_Introduction-to-Primary-Curriculum_Eng.pdf)

incremental staged model, additional work is now needed in teasing out and defining more clearly the differences between a curriculum theme and a curriculum area, and the relationship between these and subjects. A question also arises regarding alignment with, and from, *Aistear*—what might or should this mean in the context of a primary curriculum? In parallel, work is also required in exploring the concept of curriculum integration and how this can be fore-fronted in a redeveloped curriculum.

- **Curriculum content**—a redevelopment of any curriculum brings an opportunity to examine and clarify what children should be able to do through, and on foot of, their experiences with that curriculum, and to look at how curriculum content should be specified. The overview of a redeveloped primary curriculum will identify the constituent themes/areas/subjects in the curriculum taking account of the demands for broadening the scope of children’s learning in areas such as wellbeing, education about religions and beliefs and ethics, coding, and modern languages.
- **Time allocation**—informed by the consultation findings, the overview will include a new suggested time allocation framework. The consultation findings showed strong support for a number of changes to how time might be allocated within the curriculum while at the same time, highlighting some concerns namely around the concept of ‘flexible time’ as configured in the proposals. The elements contained within Flexible Time and most notably, break-times, recreational time and the patron’s programme, received particular attention and critique. Work in the next phase will require further consideration as to how schools can be afforded greater flexibility in how they use time for teaching and learning in the themes/areas/subjects of the curriculum, and importantly, how this flexibility can be better reflected and incorporated in a new suggested time allocation framework.
- **Planning, teaching and assessing**—each of the 11 subjects in the 1999 curriculum included some guidance for schools on how to assess children’s learning within that subject. Building on this and reflecting more recent research in the area, the NCCA published *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* in 2007 and online reporting and transfer materials for schools and parents in 2014. Even with this additional support, assessment and particularly formative assessment, has received limited attention in terms of supporting schools to broaden their assessment practices. Research shows that the greatest benefits for children’s learning happen when teachers provide effective feedback to them which helps them to understand how they can improve. The overview of a redeveloped primary

curriculum can build on existing good assessment practices in schools and clarify how assessment can be embedded in a redeveloped primary curriculum.

NCCA consultations with schools in 2009 and 2010 highlighted the extent to which teachers and principals found the primary curriculum to be overloaded and challenging to navigate and use in their teaching. More recent curriculum developments, namely *Aistear* and the Junior Cycle Framework, have resulted in leaner specifications with clear overarching priorities for children's learning and development. The redevelopment of the primary curriculum provides an important opportunity to reduce the 'layers' that exist within the 1999 curriculum while being clear on what we ultimately deem to be important and essential for children living and learning in the 21st century.

The process towards an overview of a redeveloped curriculum

In mapping the process through which the overview of a redeveloped curriculum will be constructed, it is helpful to consider the four interconnected areas of NCCA's work—research, working with schools and settings, consultation, and deliberations with education partners through NCCA committees. Each of these is outlined below in the context of progressing work on the development of the curriculum's overview.

Research

Extensive research, national and international, underpins the NCCA's curriculum and assessment work. In developing the overview as outlined above, the NCCA will draw on existing research, assessments and evaluations as well as contemporary literature. In the case of the latter, the Council will commission short research papers to tease out particular aspects of a primary curriculum, such as purpose, values and priorities, curriculum integration, skills and dispositions, and pedagogies. As they are completed, these papers will be published on the NCCA website and used as the basis for discussion and debate in order to further clarify directions for a redeveloped primary curriculum.

Work with schools and settings

The development of the overview will also, importantly, be shaped by ideas, experiences and evidence from schools and early childhood settings. Working directly with schools and settings creates opportunities for NCCA to learn from their innovative work with the curriculum including, for example, embedding playful and more active teaching and learning in the early years of primary education;

using time in creative ways across the curriculum; integrating a range of digital technologies in children's daily experiences; developing inclusive practices to support *all* children; and expanding the range of children's classroom experiences. In this way, schools represent critical learning sites for NCCA in drawing on their creative thinking about primary education and what it should do for children. This is important for redeveloping the curriculum as well as for thinking about how best to manage and plan for the complexities of curriculum change as noted by many respondents across the consultation when they spoke of change and the need for it to be supported in a focused and developmental way.

Consultation

As already noted, the overview of a redeveloped primary curriculum will be the focus of an extensive consultation in 2019. The development of the overview itself will also be underpinned by ongoing discussions and opportunities to explore and tease out ideas for the redeveloped curriculum. In facilitating this, throughout 2018 the NCCA will organise a series of seminars on particular aspects of the curriculum. Short research papers together with ideas, experiences and evidence from schools as referenced above, will provide an important backdrop for discussions at the seminars. Deliberations from these events will feed directly into the development of the curriculum overview.

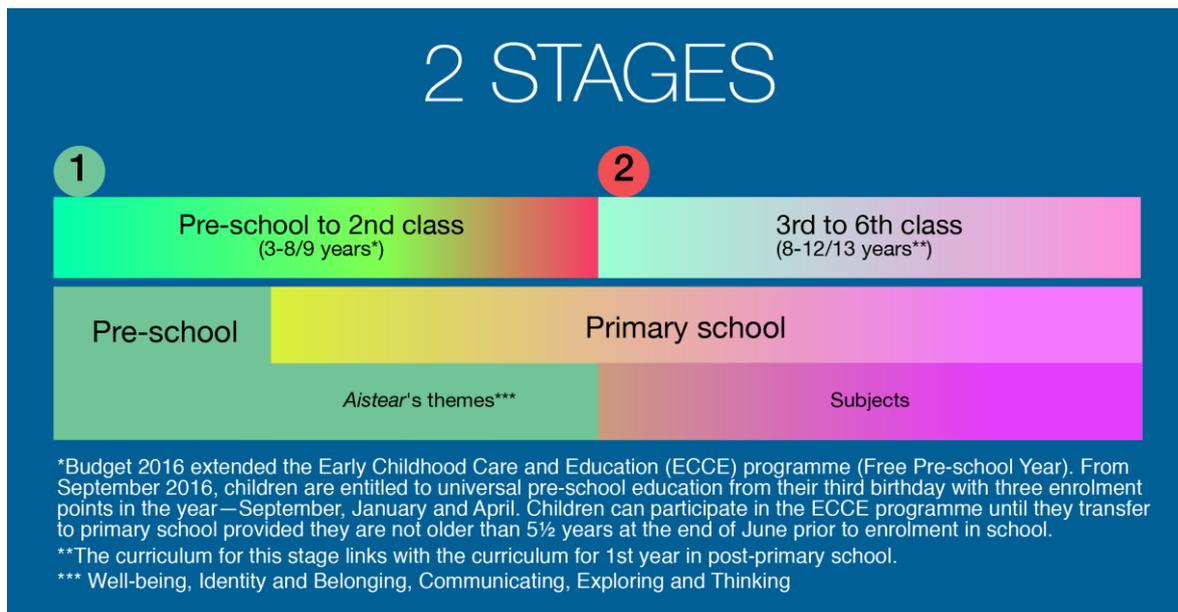
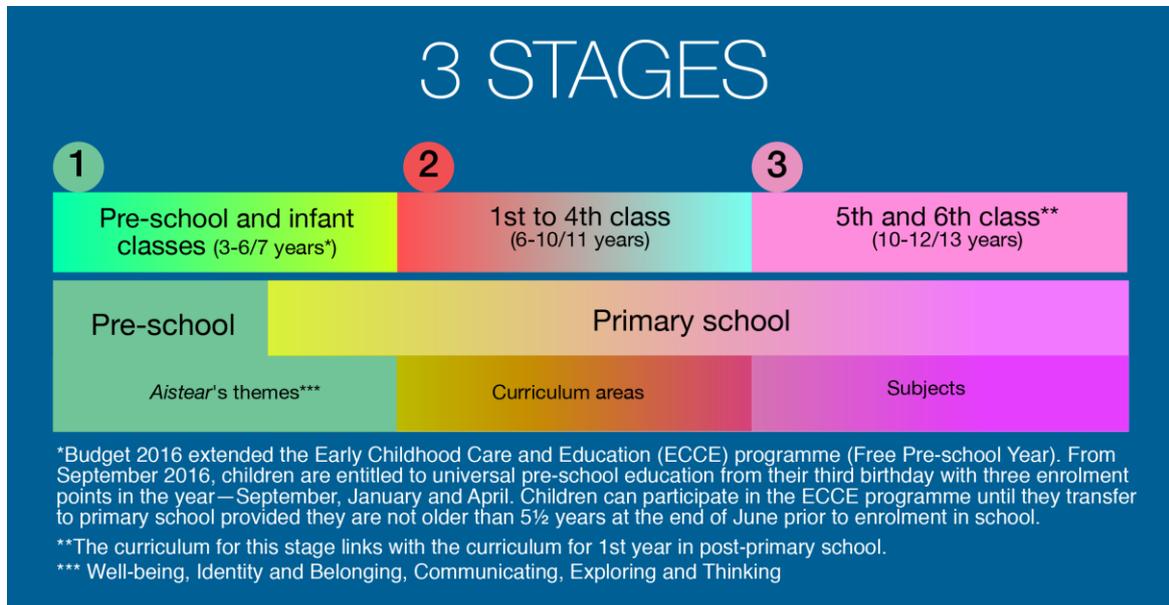
Deliberations with education partners

The drafting of the overview of a redeveloped primary curriculum will be a significant part of the NCCA's work in 2018. The work will be supported by, and progressed with, the education partners through the Board for Early Childhood and Primary, and Council. The work will take account of existing and planned curriculum and assessment developments namely the new *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga Bunscoile* currently in the initial phase of implementation in the junior years of primary school, and the new *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* due for publication in 2018 (junior classes) and in 2019 (senior classes). The overview will also reflect the outcomes from the NCCA's ongoing school-based initiative on coding in primary schools which explores different approaches to integrating coding in the curriculum, and ongoing work with schools on inclusive practices in intercultural, religious and ethical education.

Together, these four interconnected strands of work—research, work with schools and settings, consultation, and deliberations—will enable robust debate and informed consideration of questions central to the development of a primary curriculum. Such activity should help to signpost, more clearly, directions for a new curriculum with 2019 bringing an opportunity for extensive consultation

on those directions before moving ahead with the development of the curriculum itself from late 2019.

Appendix 1: Proposed incremental models for a new primary curriculum



Appendix 2: Proposed model of time allocation for primary schools

