



Ms Sarah Cremin
Committee Secretariat
Committee of Public Accounts
Leinster House
Dublin 2
D02 XR20

8th March, 2022

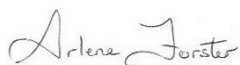
Ref: S0732 PAC33

Dear Ms Cremin,

I refer to your letter dated February 23rd requesting a response from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to matters raised in correspondence submitted to the Committee of Public Accounts (Ref: S0732 PAC33). Accompanying this letter is a short document setting out relevant points and clarifications. In addition, NCCA has been invited by the Department of Education to attend a meeting with representatives from Atheist Ireland which we understand will take place in the coming weeks.

We are happy to provide further information if helpful.

Yours sincerely,



Arlene Forster
Chief Executive

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**NCCA**

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curacáim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a statutory body. As outlined in the Education Act (1998), the Council's remit is to advise the Minister for Education on matters relating to the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools, and the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum (Section 41.1 a, b).

In accordance with the Education Act, the Council is a representative structure and is appointed by the Minister for Education. It has 25 members who represent teachers, school managers, parents, business interests, trade unions, the Irish language sector and other educational interests. Other members include representatives of the Department of Education, the State Examinations Commission, a nominee each of the Minister for Education and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The Council is supported in its work by boards and development groups. The last Council completed its term on February 28th, 2022 and it's expected that the Minister will appoint a new Council shortly for a four-year period.

The NCCA has a full-time executive staff, led by a Chief Executive. Funding is by way of a grant from the Department of Education.

Development of curriculum specifications

As noted, the Council's work is progressed through a number of representative structures. This representation brings significant experience and expertise and supports the development of high-quality advice on curriculum and assessment matters at early childhood, primary and post-primary levels. In addition to the Council itself, work is progressed through boards and development groups whose work takes place with the agreement and under the guidance of Council. Council also uses other structures such as working or standing groups to advance aspects of its work, and liaises with key bodies and sectors.

NCCA develops curriculum and assessment advice in an iterative and responsive manner through close engagement with learners, teachers, practitioners, parents and school leaders; through

extensive public consultation; by drawing on research evidence, good practice and international experience; and through ongoing discussion and deliberation by the Council, boards and development groups (see Figure 1). Throughout the work, the Council remains attuned to new opportunities to innovate and to new national policy priorities as they arise.

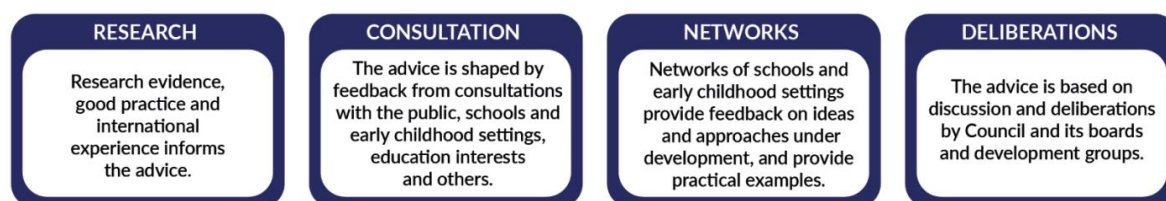


Figure 1: Development of curriculum and assessment advice

While NCCA is not responsible for implementing curriculum change, it supports educational change in early childhood settings and in primary and post-primary schools by developing a range of support materials such as examples of practice, examples of student work, assessment guidelines and planning resources, and by working with those introducing new developments to practitioners and teachers.

Context

The Education Act (1998) establishes the rights of the school patron to '*promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school*' (15) (2)(b). The Education Act (1998) also recognises the legal right for patrons to design, supervise, implement and teach their programmes. For the majority of patrons in the primary sector, their programme addresses the area of religious education, although patrons of multi-denominational and equality-based schools offer multi-belief and values programmes, and ethical programmes. The development and implementation of these programmes in primary schools remains the responsibility of the patron. Schools are legally entitled to devote a reasonable amount of time daily to the teaching of these programmes.

The *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) indicates that the Department of Education, in the context of the Education Act (1998), recognises the rights of patrons to design curricula at primary level and to supervise their teaching and implementation, as such a religious education curriculum is not included in the *Primary School Curriculum* documents (p. 58).

Religious Education in the curriculum

Religious education as an academic subject in post-primary schools

The Leaving Certificate Religious Education (RE) syllabus (2003) and the Junior Cycle Religious Education (RE) specification (2019), both developed by NCCA, provide a framework for students of all faiths, beliefs and world-views to study Religious Education as an academic subject for examination and certification purposes. The content prescribed in the syllabus/specification exposes students to a broad range of religious traditions and to non-religious interpretations of life grounded in a spirit of enquiry, freedom and respect.

'Religious Education aims to develop knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values to enable young people to come to an understanding of religion and its relevance to life, relationships, society and the wider world. It aims to develop the students' ability to examine questions of meaning, purpose and relationships, to help students understand, respect and appreciate people's expression of beliefs, and to facilitate dialogue and reflection on the diversity of beliefs and values that inform responsible decision-making and ways of living.'

(Aim of Junior Cycle Religious Education specification, p.5)

As illustrated above, it is **not** the aim of NCCA-developed courses in religious education to nurture students into a particular religious tradition or set of beliefs.

Religious Education, as an examination subject at both junior and senior cycle, encourages students to assume the roles of critical questioner and reflective researcher as they explore questions related to the meaning and purpose of life, values that inform moral decision-making and the diverse ways that people live out their beliefs. The learning outcomes are designed to foster the skills, attitudes and dispositions needed for living as a thoughtful, respectful and reflective citizen in a multi-belief and multicultural society. In this context, religious education provides a space where young people can learn about the variety of religious and non-religious ways of living, thus contributing to social cohesion, multicultural understanding and respect for the beliefs of others.

The role that religious education can play in promoting social cohesion, intercultural understanding and democracy is recognised by the Council of Europe where it refers to religious education being *'concerned with teaching young people how to think, in order to navigate a world*

*where not everyone holds their views, but we each have a duty to uphold the democratic principles which allow all cultures to co-exist.*¹

Both the Leaving Certificate RE syllabus and the new Junior Cycle RE specification promote inclusion through a multi-faith approach which equally respects and includes consideration of non-religious world-views.

'The specification affords freedom for teachers to facilitate learning in a way that reflects students' individual curiosity, choices and convictions. Working with this specification, teachers will plan learning experiences that are relevant and can engage students coming from a range of backgrounds, beliefs and world-views. In using the learning outcomes, teachers should plan for learning that is inclusive, engaging and genuinely responds to students' interests and questions.'

(Junior Cycle Religious Education specification, p.11)

This means that teachers are required to plan teaching and learning in a manner that is sensitive to and inclusive of a variety of faiths, beliefs and world-views, including Atheism, Humanism and Secularism.

The Department does not require schools to include the NCCA-developed Junior Cycle Religious Education specification or the Leaving Certificate Religious Education syllabus as part of curriculum provision for students in junior cycle and senior cycle. Where schools timetable Religious Education, parents have the right to request that their child doesn't attend this learning, as is their right with all subjects.

Religious Education in the Primary School Curriculum

Religious Education (RE) is currently one of 12 subjects in the 1999 Primary School Curriculum. It holds a unique position, as noted earlier, in that the responsibility for providing a programme of RE rests with the patrons and not with the State. There are a number of patrons' programmes within the primary school system reflecting the diversity of patronage. Some of these are denominational or religious in nature, emphasising the place of children's faith, spiritual and moral development in their lives. Other patrons' programmes are ethical or multi-belief in nature and emphasise children's understanding of ethics and values and their application in the life of the child.

¹ Council of Europe, *Competences for Democratic Culture: Living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2016), p.7.

The Patron's Programme is developed by a school's patron with the aim of contributing to the child's holistic development particularly from the religious and/or ethical perspective and in the process, underpins and supports the characteristic spirit of the school. The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (2020), developed by NCCA, presents a set of proposals for the redevelopment of the primary curriculum. The draft framework recognises the important role of the patron's programme in relation to the child's development, sense of identity and its potential to support children's connection to their community and wider society. However, in response to the call for the inclusion of new areas of learning, the draft framework proposed a reduction in the time allocated for the patron's programme from 2 hours and 30 minutes per week to 2 hours per week. Consultation on these proposals closed on February 28th and the data is currently being analysed. NCCA will report on the key findings later in the year.

Goodness Me, Goodness You!

Goodness Me, Goodness You! (GMGY) is the patron's programme/curriculum for Community National Schools. Unlike the Junior Cycle RE specification and the Leaving Certificate RE syllabus, it is not a national curriculum. A key responsibility of the patron involves the promotion of school ethos within and across the schools under its patronage. A key feature of promoting school ethos is the teaching of the patron's programme during the school day. Patrons have developed programmes that reflect and support the ethos of their schools. GMGY was developed in 2018 for Community National Schools in collaboration with children, parents and teachers of the schools, the local Education and Training Boards, the Education and Training Board of Ireland, the Department of Education and assisted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

GMGY is a multi-belief and values education curriculum. Using a multi-disciplinary framework, it enables children to encounter identity education, values education, philosophy and multi-denominational religious education. The 'Beliefs and religions' strand employs a multi-denominational approach to religious education. Multi-denominational religious education seeks to provide teaching 'about' and 'from' different religions and beliefs. Multi-denominational religious education enables children to develop an awareness of religions and beliefs but does not advocate for children's acceptance of any of them. It promotes study about religions and beliefs but does not engage in the practice of any religion. It may expose children to a diversity of religious and non-religious views, but does not impose any particular view or seek to conform or convert students to any specific religion or belief. In this way, teaching about beliefs and religions is delivered in a fair and accurate manner without undermining or ignoring the role of families and religious or belief communities in transmitting beliefs to successive generations.

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