

Letter from the Minister of Education RE: Review of Statutory Curriculum

Dr A Lennon
Chair
CCEA
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BELFAST
BT1 3BG June 2004

Dear Dr Lennon

REVIEW OF STATUTORY CURRICULUM

I am pleased now to be able to give a formal response to the Council's further advice and recommendations following its review of the curriculum. You wrote to my predecessor in December and in April giving the Council's advice and there have also been subsequent exchanges among officials. I apologise for the fact that the response has not come sooner. I should like to pay tribute to the Council and its staff for the work which has gone into these important and complex issues.

In relation to the proposed Foundation Stage, whilst progress to date on the pilots has been positive, you have advised that we should await the outcome of further evaluation before reaching a final decision. I accept that advice. It is vitally important that we get it right for children at the start of their educational career. I therefore look forward to the evaluation material in due course and we can consider the position then. It is important also that there should be a smooth transition for pupils between P2 and P3 and I am content that the pilot should be extended to include this additional cohort.

The Council's proposals for the remainder of Key Stage 1 and for the other three Key Stages represent a significant departure from the status quo. In her interim response last summer, Jane Kennedy accepted the broad thrust of the proposals and asked that a number of specific issues be addressed in the Council's further work. I acknowledge the extensive further revision which has been undertaken since then, including to take account of inspectorate comments and the responses to the further general consultation on Key Stage 3. Council officers are aware of some residual points to be taken on board, on the face of the curriculum documents or in the associated guidance. With that, the proposals are now regarded as acceptable and will be the basis of forthcoming legislation.

We will be proceeding immediately with the necessary preparatory work on the legislation but it is expected to be September 2006 before the first statutory changes are triggered, with a phased roll-out over the subsequent 4 or 5 years. Our first priority will be to remove or reduce substantially the present high level of prescription so as to give schools greater flexibility, especially at Key Stage 4, to tailor provision to the needs of their pupils.

Teachers will need extensive guidance, especially on those aspects which are new – such as Learning for Life and Work and the greater emphasis on skills. I know the Council is already working on this and also liaising with the curriculum support services about the provision of suitable training.

In developing its material in relation to Learning for Life and Work, I would ask the Council to take account of, and ensure compatibility with, the pilot work being undertaken as part of the Vocational Enhancement Programme and the scope for collaboration both between schools and with FE. For the same reason, there is a need to work towards a convergence of Key Skills and Essential Skills to ensure a common currency for the future.

The Council has undertaken to do further work on the assessment arrangements, to ensure that they are made manageable, including through the appropriate use of ICT. It is important that the level indicators are clear and well understood. There also needs to be a high level of consistency, through appropriate moderation and/or the use of common assessment materials, including those which are ICT based. I look forward to the Council's further proposals in due course. The Department will also wish to discuss with Council officers the potential for development of suitable 'value added' measures, principally to assist schools in auditing their own provision.

I accept the proposals for annual reporting, which will now be in the form of the Pupil Profile. The Profile will have a part to play in informing parents at the time when they are considering options for post-primary education and also when choices are being made about subjects and courses at the end of Key Stage 3. I would ask the Council to continue its developmental and piloting work in this area as a matter of priority.

Finally, the Council offered separate advice on the introduction of modern languages teaching at primary level. I believe that this is an important development, albeit there are many practical issues which would need to be resolved to ensure coherence in provision spanning from primary to post-primary level. I invite the Council therefore to continue its work in this area and to provide proposals for some pilot work drawing on the good practice that currently exists in some areas.

I want to offer my renewed thanks to the Council and its staff for their work. I believe that the revised curriculum, whilst continuing to ensure that all pupils have a solid grounding in all the educational essentials, will allow schools the scope to tailor their provision much more closely to the needs of their pupils, thereby increasing their engagement and enjoyment.

BARRY GARDINER