

Consultation on proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum

Respondent's details

First name	Helen
Surname	McAvoy
Position (If applicable)	Director of Policy
Organisation (If applicable)	Institute of Public Health in Ireland
Address	5th Floor Bishop's Square Redmond's Hill Dublin 2
Telephone	01-4786300
Email	Helen.mcavoy@publichealth.ie
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Is this response a personal view or is it made on behalf of an organisation?

Personal Organisation

Do you consent to the submission being published online at the end of the consultation?

Yes No

Written submissions may be in English or Irish.

Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum can be found [here](#).

Please email your submissions to structureandtime@ncca.ie

1. The first set of proposals in the Consultation Paper recommends moving from a model comprising four two-year stages to an incremental model of either three stages or two stages.

Please consider:

- The extent to which you agree / disagree with this proposed change to a **three- /two-stage model**
- The benefits / challenges of the **two-stage model**
- The benefits / challenges of the **three-stage model**
- **Your preferred model and reasons** for this preference.

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland (IPH) welcomes the opportunity to submit our views on *the NCCA Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum*.

In particular we welcome that the structure and time allocation for a redeveloped primary curriculum is based on national and international evidence as set out in the consultation document. It is clear that both the content and the implementation of the curriculum must be evidence-based and catered around the learning and support needs of children to equip them to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

IPH welcomes the proposed changes within the pre-school and primary curriculum from the current five-stage to a new model and in particular the closer alignment proposed between pre-school and infant primary schools.

While recognising the benefits and challenges of both models proposed, the option preferred by IPH is the three stage model. We consider that this model better reflects stages of childhood development than the two stage option.

2. The second set of proposals in the Consultation Paper recommends a new model of time allocation for primary schools.

Please consider:

- The extent to which you agree / disagree with the proposals on **minimum state curriculum time**
- The extent to which you agree / disagree with the proposals on **flexible time**
- The idea of **specifying time allocations** for themes/curriculum areas/subjects
- Your views on whether time should be allocated on a **weekly, monthly termly, annual basis**.

A. Understanding of the position of PE within curriculum implementation

IPH considers that both SPHE and PE are critical components of a child's learning experience. We recommend that schools commitment to protected PE time is recognised not as an optional or stand-alone 'health' activity, but rather as a broad investment in child wellbeing and development.

Unlike most other subjects, PE can directly contribute to both health and educational outcomes. Participation in PE has the capacity to release a dividend in terms of the ‘enhanced learning/social outcomes’ featured on page 25 of the consultation document – for example building confidence, relationships, learning through playful experiences, sense of self-esteem, resilience and grit.

B. Contribution of PE to physical activity levels and policy goals

The National Physical Activity Plan (Department of Health, 2016) is a flagship programme under the Healthy Ireland Framework (Dept of an Taoiseach, 2013). The Healthy Ireland Framework recognises that the creation of health within the population relies on the integration of a ‘health in all policies’ approach where all opportunities for health promotion are realised in a variety of settings including schools.

The National Physical Activity Plan recommends that

“All children and young people should be active at a moderate to vigorous level for at least 60 minutes a day, including muscle strengthening, flexibility, and bone strengthening exercises three times a week”

The National Physical Activity Plan has also set a target to increase by 1% per annum, the proportion of children undertaking at least one hour of exercise a day, and decrease by 0.5% per annum, the proportion of children who do not undertake any weekly physical activity.

The Physical Education Curriculum (Department of Education, 1999) recommended that a minimum of one hour per week be allocated to physical education in primary schools. We infer that there is no commitment to change the current time allocation from previous practice. This time allocation is insufficient. It means that PE is unlikely to make any real contribution to increasing physical activity levels of our children, as is stated in the government policy goals above.

The commitment of one hour a week is far below the recommendation of the EU Expert Group on Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (European Commission, 2015). This Group recommends a minimum of five lessons a week of PE during compulsory education time. In addition, it is worth noting that the time spent teaching physical education in Irish primary schools remained constant between 2006/07 and 2011/12 at 37 hours per year. This is in stark contrast to the highest country on the list, France, where primary schools teach 108 hours of physical education per year. Additionally, Ireland is lowest ranked in the European Union for time allocated to physical education as a proportion of total taught time, at just 4% (European Commission, 2013).

A recent global analysis of physical activity among children included data from Ireland on PE participation. This Physical Activity Report Card awarded a D- to Ireland on the measure of PE in schools

(Harrington, 2016).

C. Assets and barriers to implementation of PE in primary schools

The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study concluded that 35% of primary school pupils received the Department of Education minimum guidelines of one hour of PE every week (Woods, 2010). However, an analysis of the Growing Up in Ireland Survey (McCoy, 2012) and the Lifeskills Survey (Department of Education and Skills, 2014) found a more positive picture of PE implementation. There were particularly good results in Gaelscoileanna and in schools where there was a more even gender balance in the teaching staff.

Although there is some positive news in the more recent survey data, there remain considerable 'unknowns' on many aspects of PE implementation and data has not been updated since 2014 (Harrington, 2016). We recommend that this should be monitored on an ongoing basis through a blend of teacher/pupil self-report as well as through external observation and integration into existing systems of school inspection procedures. Building this into school monitoring and reporting processes is recommended rather than a reliance on once-off surveys. There is considerable variation in survey data in the way that participation in PE is measured and agreeing a standard measure is recommended (Harrington et al, 2016).

The consultation document highlights evidence relating to the challenges faced by school to deliver fully across a broad curriculum. Time is frequently cited as the main factor inhibiting teachers and school management to deliver across the full range of learning themes and topics, including SPHE and PE. The feasibility of successfully implementing PE in primary schools may have been hindered by Circular 0056/2011 which requested primary teachers increase the amount of weekly class time spent on literacy and numeracy. Indeed, it can be argued that although the minimum physical education guidelines remain at one hour a week, implementation of this guideline will be severely limited due to allocation of hours to other elements of learning. Trade-offs amongst different subjects are inevitable and PE may be less protected (McCoy, 2012).

We recommend that the implementation of PE time should be supported by investment in appropriate facilities. It has been estimated that 81% of primary schools do not have access to an indoor multi-purpose hall for the purpose of PE (Woods, 2010). The enthusiasm and enjoyment of PE will be enhanced by the availability of suitable facilities.

We recommend that school rules be adapted to facilitate students to engage in PE such as encouragement to wear their tracksuit to school on more days of the week. This will remove any concerns on the time spent changing in and out of uniforms, allow for greater flexibility in the allocation of PE hours and other opportunities for physical activity across the day as well as sending an important message about the importance the school places on participation in PE.

In addition, we recommend that the Department of Education enhance investment and support for the Active School Flag initiative currently operating in around 627 primary schools nationally. This initiative has the capacity to support the implementation of PE in terms of both quantity and quality over time. In addition, the programme can help teachers who are under pressure to deliver across a broad curriculum by bringing in additional resources, supports and innovation from the community through the participation of students, parents and local sports clubs.

D. Quantity and quality in PE implementation

The aim of PE should be clearly understood by school management, teachers, pupils and their parents. We recommend that the purpose of physical education in primary school is to provide children with an opportunity to enhance their physical literacy skills and engage in activity that is enjoyable, health enhancing and lays the groundwork for a sustainable habit of physical activity. We would encourage the education sector to afford the greatest value to getting the most sedentary children to participate, to learn fundamental movement skills and to grow their confidence in at least one form of physical activity that is sustainable and enjoyable for them. The Department of Education/NCCA should clarify the role of school-based physical activity, including PE, for those pupils with obesity who are engaged in weight management programmes.

We consider that PE is not an appropriate forum to focus on enhancing the competitive performance of either individuals or school-teams. Adopting a competitive focus to PE may widen existing inequalities in physical activity and foster disengagement by children and be contrary to the wellbeing agenda. IPH also recommends that physical activity should be encouraged and facilitated throughout the school day and that emphasis on taught physical education is only one component of a student opportunity for physical activity. Opportunity for physical activity should be welcomed in all curricular activities and ideally a 'whole school' approach should be employed to enhance the impact of a suite of interventions, as clearly demonstrated through the Active School Flag initiative.

We propose that any changes to the PE curriculum should be one component of an integrated

physical activity approach that encompasses active travel, standing time, play and extracurricular activities, in line with the approach set out in the National Physical Activity Plan.

References

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McCoy, S., Smyth, E., and Banks, J. (2012) *"The Primary Classroom: Insights from the Growing Up*

in Ireland Study". (Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute)

Woods, C., Moyna, N., Quinlan, A., Tannehill, D., and Walsh, J. (2010) *"The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study (CSPPA)"*. (Dublin: School of Health and Human Performance Dublin City University, and the Irish Sports Council)

3. Reflecting in general on the proposals for a new primary curriculum structure and for rethinking how time is used within the curriculum, are there any further comments or reflections that you would like to share?

N/A.