The Northern Ireland Curriculum

Background

In 1987 when Kenneth Baker, the then Education Secretary announced that there was to be a statutory National Curriculum in England and Wales, his colleague, Brian Mawhinney, then Minister of Education in Northern Ireland announced that similar legislation would be introduced there.

In 1992 the first Northern Ireland Curriculum was introduced – similar in structure to that in England and Wales but with a few points of distinction in relation to subjects and cross-curricular themes.

It was found in practice to be much too overloaded and, in 1996, was revised with a significant amount of content removed but remaining unchanged in structure.

In 1999 the then Minister gave permission for the CCEA to undertake a fundamental review of the statutory requirements of the curriculum. Following a five year period of research, review and consultation, a new and quite different statutory curriculum was approved in 2004. Legislation has now been passed for the phased introduction of that curriculum beginning in September 2007 over a 3 year period.

Among the changes now being introduced is a new Foundation Stage for the first two years. The purpose of the Foundation Stage is to concentrate on developing a child’s dispositions and readiness to learn, rather than to force the pace with children who are not sufficiently prepared for formal learning.

The new curriculum, in each of its stages, is now almost devoid of statutory requirements relating to subject content. This enables teachers to choose appropriate content for the particular pupils they are teaching. The statutory requirements now mostly concern the skills and competences that children are expected to develop rather than to the content that they must learn. There is emphasis on information management skills and on thinking skills, problem solving and creativity.

A core element of the new curriculum is described under the heading “Learning for Life and Work.” This area includes the three dimensions of Citizenship, Employability and Personal Development. Where, previously, these areas had been peripheral to the subject content of the old curriculum, they are now a central theme of the new one and the subject requirements are related to them.

The result of these changes is that, from 2007, there will be much greater divergence between the statutory curriculum in NI and that in England. There may, however, be less difference in classroom practice as teachers will be free to continue with similar content as now if they wish to do so, so long as they address the new requirements.

One structural difference between the education system in NI and that in the rest of the UK is the earlier start to statutory education. A child must begin school in the September following his or her 4th birthday. The effect of this is that there are 12 years of statutory education (Y1-Y7 primary and Y8-Y12 secondary) in NI and not 11 as elsewhere (Y1-Y6 primary and Y7-Y11 secondary).
The information requested in terms of Key Stages, age ranges and subjects etc. is set out below.

**Key Stages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Stage</th>
<th>“Old” Curriculum</th>
<th>New Curriculum from 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Y1 and Y2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Stage 1</td>
<td>Y1–Y4</td>
<td>Y3 and Y4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Stage 2</td>
<td>Y5–Y7</td>
<td>Y5–Y7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Stage 3</td>
<td>Y8–Y10</td>
<td>Y8–Y10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Stage 4</td>
<td>Y11,Y12</td>
<td>Y11,Y12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Levels**

The scale of levels from 1-8 used in England is also used in Northern Ireland. In the current arrangements there are no statutory tests in primary schools. Pupils are assessed by their teachers in English and Maths at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2. Teachers are required to make use of assessment materials provided by CCEA and there is a system of moderation to ensure consistency of assessment standards across different schools. At Key Stage 3 all children must take tests in English, Maths and Science as in England. Levels are reported for each of the attainment targets in a subject, again as in England, and also for the subject as a whole.

There is also a voluntary scheme of assessment based on levels for IT.

These arrangements will change with the introduction of the new curriculum. The levels will continue to be used but in the context of an annual report called the Pupil Profile. This will be issued every year beginning with Year 3 and will include teacher assessed levels of skills in Communication, Using Mathematics and ICT. Other areas (including Learning for Life and Work) will be included in the Profile but without the use of levels. The Key Stage 3 tests will be discontinued.

**Subjects and Learning Areas making up the Revised Curriculum being phased in from September 2007**

The revised primary curriculum includes the following Learning Areas for the Foundation Stage and for Key Stages 1 and 2, in addition to a continuing requirement to study RE:

*The Arts*
*Language and Literacy*
*Mathematics and Numeracy*
*Personal Development*
*Physical Education*
*The World Around Us*
NI Curriculum Overview

See the NI Schools teachers page for links to CCEA information -
“The Big Picture of the Primary Curriculum”
“The Big Picture of the Key Stage 3 Curriculum”
These documents give an overview of the structure of the revised primary and KS3 curricula and the relationship of the different elements within them.

Although some teachers will be continuing to operate under the current curriculum at least until 2009, most are already shifting their attention in planning to the revised one.
“The full implementation schedule” document gives an overview of the schedule of implementation of the new curricula.

At Key Stage 3 the Learning Areas in the new curriculum and the strands into which they are divided consist of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Area</th>
<th>Strands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning for Life and Work</td>
<td>Personal Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Home Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local and Global Citizenship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education for Employability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Arts</td>
<td>Art and design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English or Irish</td>
<td>English including Media Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Irish (Irish medium schools) including Media Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment and Society</td>
<td>Geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics including Financial Capability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Languages</td>
<td>Modern Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td>Physical Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Technology</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As previously there is a requirement to study Religious Education. In line with earlier Key Stages, Learning for Life and Work is core and all of the requirements in the other Learning Areas are cross-referenced to it.

The statutory requirements at Key Stage 4 have been progressively reduced since the introduction of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, first being limited to outline Programmes of Study and secondly being made dependent on the criteria used for accrediting qualifications such as GCSE.

In the new curriculum there is only a blanket requirement that pupils should:
• study a range of courses leading to accredited qualifications;
• include elements of Learning for Life and Work in their curriculum
• undertake work in PE and RE
• develop their general skills and capabilities.

bbc.co.uk/ni/schools/teachers
This leaves schools with much greater flexibility to vary the provision for individual pupils according to their abilities and interests. In addition there is also to be introduced a Statutory Framework that will require all schools to offer a range of 24 subjects in Key Stage 4 (27 post-16). One third of these must be general courses and one third must be applied courses.
Appendix 1: Subjects of the Current Curriculum being phased out from September 2007

The following are the subjects included in the current, "old" curriculum for Key Stages 1 and 2 in primary schools:

- English
- Maths
- Science and Technology
- History
- Geography
- Art and Design
- Music
- Physical Education

There are also four Cross-Curricular Themes:

- Education for Mutual Understanding
- Health Education
- Cultural Heritage
- IT

In addition, there is a requirement, separate from the curriculum, to study Religious Education.

At Key Stage 3 the current curriculum consists of (in addition to the four Cross-Curricular Themes mentioned above and Religious Education):

- English
- Maths
- Science
- Technology
- Modern Languages
- History
- Geography
- Art and Design
- Music
- Physical Education