

SECONDARY CURRICULUM DESIGN

Purpose

1. This starter paper begins to explore what effective secondary curriculum design looks like and what Curriculum and Assessment Board members can do to support improvements in this area.

Introduction

2. Curriculum for Excellence provides a broad, national framework within which schools are empowered to design a curriculum which meets the needs and aspirations of their learners. We know from Education Scotland's inspection evidence and from their wider improvement work that school leaders are keen to continuously improve the curriculum they offer their young people and are looking for practical and peer support to help them do so. We also know that many school leaders already use the flexibility and autonomy they have to design a relevant and challenging secondary curriculum and that they are able and willing to share their learning.

3. The process of secondary curriculum design is a topical subject amidst the Education and Skills Committee's recent inquiry into senior phase subject choice and Education Scotland's thematic inspection of empowerment for curriculum leadership. This paper therefore picks out some of the factors evident from successful secondary curriculum development and invites Curriculum and Assessment Board members to consider how they currently support schools to do this and what further support they could offer.

A sound S1 to S6 curriculum rationale

4. The curriculum making process requires to be underpinned and shaped by a clear rationale. It asks that practitioners have a clear understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it. That understanding is informed by the needs and entitlements of the young people they work with and set within the broad national framework.

5. The importance of 'understanding your learners', 'knowing the big ideas' and being 'clear on practical approaches' is highlighted in the work of the CAB sub-group on the refreshed narrative on Scotland's curriculum.

6. Recent discussions about schools' curriculum suggest that school leaders are not as confident as they could be in articulating and presenting their rationale. This is more evident when they are asked to present their rationale beyond the domains within which they usually operate, for example, with employers or even at times with parents. A cursory review of school websites, for example, would not convey the richness that may well be a school's curriculum.

A broad general education (BGE) between S1 – S3 which builds on prior BGE learning and experiences and provides sufficient pace and challenge to support the transition to the senior phase

7. An important aim of CfE was that learners should benefit from a 'broad, general education' (BGE) including well planned experiences and outcomes across all the curriculum areas from early years through to S3 before embarking on senior phase of education after S3 which provides opportunities to obtain qualifications as well as to continue to develop the

four capacities. The aim of the BGE is for learners to develop "a deeper and more secure level of attainment and achievement by the end of S3"¹ which in turn provides a solid foundation for a number of senior phase pathways.

8. The success of such an approach in secondary schools is dependent on a number of key factors. These include: consistent and accurate assessment of the attainment and achievement of individual learners as they progress into S1 and through to S3; effective arrangements for transition and progression for learners; and a strong understanding of the standards expected in CfE levels and how they relate SCQF levels and the requirements of National Qualifications and other awards.

9. Education Scotland inspection evidence has shown that many schools in Scotland have "responded well to challenges of designing pathways for learners through the broad general education and the senior phase"². However, we also see that there is a need in some cases to "continue to work with primary schools to build on prior learning...to ensure that all young people can apply their learning [between S1 and S3] with sufficient pace and challenge...[and to] pay particular attention to reviewing young people's experiences in S3...providing effective transition to the senior phase"³.

10. A need therefore remains to support secondary practitioners in designing a broad general education in line with local contexts and priorities but which also delivers on the aspirations of Curriculum for Excellence. This includes making full use of the four contexts for the curriculum and strengthening, for example, young people's experience of interdisciplinary learning.

11. Recent work arising from DYW activity in schools suggests an appetite for more focussed efforts to make the S3 profile work. This would enable the learning and achievements of young people who have completed the BGE to be more formally recognised.

A senior phase which provides personalised pathways and is developed jointly with learners, parents and partners

12. As well as supporting learners to continue to develop the four capacities and obtain qualifications, the aims of the senior phase curriculum have always been to:

- meet the needs of all learners, whether aspiring to achievements at SCQF level 1 or at SCQF level 7;
- comprise more than programmes which lead to qualifications;
- have a continuing emphasis on health and wellbeing;
- provide opportunities for personal achievement, service to others and practical experience of the world of work.

13. These entitlements represented a clear and deliberate broadening of the focus to beyond exams and traditional qualifications.

14. In order to do this, schools are: designing and delivering a bespoke three-year senior phase jointly with a range of key partners, including colleges, employers, universities and Community Learning and Development; ensuring parity of esteem amongst all senior phase pathways; and bringing parents and carers on board with curriculum options from an early stage. This has been strengthened through DYW.

¹ The Scottish Government (2008) – '*Building the Curriculum 3*' p6

² Education Scotland (2017) – '*Quality and Improvement in Scottish Education 2012-2016*' p21

³ *ibid*

15. The schools who have made most progress in designing a three year senior phase have several common features of practice. They will have:

- used data on their school community to help shape the offer;
- engaged – during the BGE- with young people to understand their motivations and aspirations;
- developed local and/or digital partnerships that will enable them to extend the offer for young people and can be sustained over time as needed;
- expanded the range of awards and qualifications beyond the ‘traditional’ offer;
- started to use the SCQF to plan out links between qualifications and awards and to support their development of learning pathways for individuals and groups;
- involved and informed parents in the process of development; and
- supported young people and parents to be aware of possibilities and options long before the traditional option choice stage.

16. But we also know from *Quality Improvement in Scottish Education* that “some establishments and services have not adapted and developed their curriculum as quickly or coherently as expected.”⁴

Next steps

17. Over the last academic session, 2018/19, the Scottish Government and Education Scotland have gathered a range of evidence on the secondary curriculum, from a range of sources including: messages from four regional DYW local authority/ college events; evidence submitted to the Education & Skills Committee Inquiry; feedback from the Learner Journey (Senior Phase) Working Group; work with Young Scot on the Learner Journey Programme; messages from the DYW Programme Board and National Advisory Group; Education Scotland inspections and engagement work; the DYW school information gathering exercise; recent creative catalyst work on curriculum design; and the Senior Phase Headteacher Survey (to go out 31/05).

18. The Scottish Government and Education Scotland will be working to analyse these and identify the common themes emerging from these over the next few months and will bring this to CAB for further discussion early in the next academic session. In the meantime, it would be helpful to hear from CAB members on any other evidence to be considered.

Points for discussion

19. The Curriculum and Assessment Board are invited to discuss:

- what is action required at:
 - a) local;
 - b) regional; and
 - c) national levelto provide challenge and support to education establishments in relation to secondary curriculum design;
- how Board members can both individually and collectively contribute to this approach within an empowered system; and
- what further evidence we need to take into account.

⁴ Education Scotland (2017) – ‘*Quality and Improvement in Scottish Education 2012-2016*’ p53