



Circular 0138/2006

To Boards of Management, Principal Teachers and Teaching Staff of Primary Schools

Supporting Assessment in Primary Schools

The website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (www.ncca.ie) sets out a series of publications aimed at re-envisioning assessment in primary schools in the context of the revised Primary School Curriculum and the obligations under Article 22 of the Education Act on schools *“to regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents.”* The publications seek to support the development of a school policy on assessment which would provide for assessment *for* learning (information to guide a student’s future learning) and assessment *of* learning (information on a student’s achievements at that point in time).

A range of assessment approaches are recommended including teacher observation, questioning and discussion, samples of children’s work, portfolios, projects and tasks and tests, self-assessment by the child, standardised tests and diagnostic tests. The objective is to position assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning. This issue has been further highlighted in the Primary Curriculum Review Phase 1 Final Report, in which teachers highlighted their need for more advice on the use of different assessment tools and resources, on recording evidence of assessment and on reporting on children’s learning to parents. Building on this work, the NCCA is currently working on the development of practical guidelines on assessment, including exemplars of children’s work, and on the development of report card templates for reporting children’s progress to parents.

The Minister for Education and Science has accepted the advice of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) that, as part of a range of assessment approaches, all pupils should take standardised tests in English reading and Mathematics at the end of first class OR the beginning of second class, AND at the end of fourth class OR the beginning of fifth class.

It is estimated that 95% of schools already use such tests. You are requested to ensure **that standardised testing is implemented in your school on an annual basis in the relevant classes in English Reading and Mathematics beginning in the calendar year 2007.**

Pupils may be excluded from the test if in the view of the school principal they have a learning or physical disability which would prevent them from attempting the test, or in the case of newcomer pupils, where their level of English is such that attempting such a test would be inappropriate. Further advice on this issue will be provided as part of the teacher professional development programme to be provided.

There is widespread acceptance of the value of standardised testing as one of a range of modes of assessment that help teachers to make more informed decisions in relation to teaching and learning. The results of standardised tests can be used to inform parents of pupils’ progress and to assist in the identification of pupils that may require support.

Professional Development for Teachers

A national professional development programme in assessment for learning will be provided for teachers over a number of years. This will aim to support teachers in placing assessment at the heart of the teaching and learning process, supporting children's cognitive, creative, affective, physical and social development. It is intended that all teachers and principals will have access to the programme on a rolling basis. The intensive phase of the Primary Curriculum Support Programme in regard to the revised curriculum will be completed in 2006/07. From 2007/8 onwards, an ongoing programme of professional development for teachers will be continued, and assessment for learning will be an important national priority in that context.

The first stage of the national programme will focus on standardised testing and will be targeted initially at the relevant class teachers implementing this circular, beginning with one day's provision in the Spring of 2007. The day will provide for a focus on decision-making regarding the application of the tests, and interpretation of the results. Schools will be contacted regarding the detail of these arrangements in due course by the Teacher Education Section. Given the arrangements generally in place for supervision and substitution, and the fact that only the relevant classes are being targeted at this stage, it is envisaged that the employment of substitute teachers during absence for attendance at inservice training will not be necessary in the majority of cases. However, in exceptional cases in small schools, substitution may be allowed where essential. A Certificate of Attendance will be provided by the Support Service where necessary to be used by the school to claim the cost of substitute cover. This should be included with the documentation submitted to the Department when claiming payment of substitution costs.

Selection of test instruments

The selection of the appropriate standardised test instrument is a matter for decision by individual schools, provided that the tests chosen are normed for the Irish population and are consistent with the Primary School Curriculum introduced in 1999. It also is a matter for individual schools whether the tests are applied at the end of first class or beginning of second classes, and at the end of fourth class or beginning of fifth class.

Grants available

A grant of €3.60 per pupil will be issued to all schools to cover the estimated cost of the tests materials in English reading and Mathematics, based on the **overall enrolment** in the school for the previous year. It is expected that some of this funding will be used to purchase materials such as teachers' manuals, test scoring services or test-related software offered by test providers.

The grant will issue to schools before the end of the current calendar year. Any funds remaining after the standardised testing costs have been met may be spent on diagnostic tests to the extent feasible in accordance with a school's needs.

Maintenance of records

For pupils in the selected classes, the results of the tests should be maintained carefully by the school and should be available for inspection by Department officials. With effect from 2007/8, the results of testing should be reported to parents in respect of their own children in accordance with the reporting template being piloted at present in a number of selected schools by the NCCA. You can view this template at www.ncca.ie and communicate your views to the NCCA on it should you wish to do so.

While the results of standardised testing must be available to inspectors conducting evaluations, inspectors will not make references to test data in their reports that might facilitate school comparisons or the compilation of league tables.

Programme of national monitoring

In accordance with NCCA advice, it is intended that the implementation of standardised testing at school level will be complemented by a separate programme of national monitoring undertaken by the Educational Research Centre (ERC). It is envisaged that the monitoring will be carried out by the ERC based on the model currently used to conduct national surveys of reading and mathematics in primary schools. The assessments will be targeted at

- A nationally representative sample of schools
- A representative sample of schools in the School Support Programme of DEIS
- A representative sample of Irish medium schools

It is planned that the national monitoring will be repeated on a cyclical basis, with the DEIS sample being undertaken more frequently. The purpose will be to identify changes in national trends over time for particular categories of school and to inform ongoing policy development.

No individual school results will be identifiable in this process.

General

You are requested to **make provision for the requirements of this circular in the school development planning process in your school and, specifically, to**

- make arrangements for the implementation of standardised testing in English reading and Mathematics on an annual basis for all pupils at the end of first class OR beginning of second class AND the end of fourth class OR beginning of fifth class with effect from the calendar year (January-December) 2007
- ensure that the results of standardised tests are available for inclusion in the Report Card Templates (currently being piloted by the NCCA) which will be used by schools for reporting on children's progress to parents from 2007/8 onwards.

Please bring this circular to the attention of teachers and members of the school board of management. This circular may also be accessed at www.education.ie under Education Personnel/primary/Circulars and Information Booklets.

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