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Circular Letter 0056/2011

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

**INITIAL STEPS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE NATIONAL LITERACY AND NUMERACY STRATEGY**

SUMMARY

This circular

- Draws the attention of boards of management, principal teachers and teachers to the publication of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, 2011 – 2020* (see Section 1-2)
- Lists five areas for immediate action under the strategy (Section 3)
- Provides brief information on some initial developments in professional development opportunities for teachers to support literacy and numeracy (Section 4)
- Asks schools to increase the time devoted to the teaching of literacy and numeracy with effect from January 2012 (Section 5)
- Outlines the arrangements for the assessment of pupils' progress that are designed to support better literacy and numeracy teaching in school, including information on enhanced grants to schools for the purchase of assessment materials (Section 6)
- Describes how assessment information on pupils' progress should be recorded, used and reported (Section 7)
- Provides information on national and international assessments of reading and mathematics in which Irish schools are involved and sets out requirements on schools regarding participation in these studies (Section 8).

The requirements on schools contained in this circular are highlighted in italicised bold type. (A summary of these requirements is included in Section 9 of the circular.)

Please bring this circular to the attention of teachers and members of the school board of management.

Margaret Kelly,
Principal
4th November 2011

INTRODUCTION

The Minister for Education and Skills has asked that *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, 2011 - 2020* be brought to the attention of boards of management, principal teachers and teaching staff of primary schools. A copy of the strategy is available for download on the Department's website, www.education.ie. A printed summary of the key measures in the Strategy is enclosed for the information of teachers and members of boards of management.

Literacy¹ and numeracy² are among the most important skills taught in our schools. They are fundamental to a person's ability to succeed in education, to gain fulfilling employment and to lead a satisfying and rewarding life. The national strategy emphasises the important roles that schools, teachers and parents play in fully developing these skills.

2. CONSULTATION PROCESS

The national strategy was developed and published by the Minister for Education and Skills following an extensive consultation process. Many teachers and school communities contributed to the process and national organisations representing teachers, parents, boards of management and many community organisations were also involved.

The publication of the strategy marks the beginning of a major national effort to improve literacy and numeracy standards among children and young people. The strategy adopts a comprehensive approach and includes a broad range of actions. These include measures to improve the curriculum, to build the capacity of school leaders, to enhance teaching skills through the provision of continuing professional development, to strengthen and extend the duration of initial teacher education, and to promote a greater awareness among parents and the community of the importance of literacy and numeracy. These actions will be implemented over time. Supports for schools and teachers are being made available through enhanced provision for continuing professional development.

The Minister wishes to convey his sincere gratitude to the large number of individual principals, teachers and school staffs that submitted detailed responses and suggestions to the Draft Plan for Literacy and Numeracy. Many of these suggestions are reflected in the National Strategy.

3. FIVE AREAS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

The Minister now seeks the co-operation of school management and teachers in the implementation of five key areas of the Strategy:

- (a) Improved professional development for teachers
- (b) Increasing the time available for teaching literacy and numeracy

¹ Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media.

² Numeracy encompasses the ability to use mathematical understanding and skills to solve problems and meet the demands of day-to-day living in complex social settings.

- (c) Improving arrangements for assessment of children's literacy and numeracy achievement
- (d) Better arrangement for reporting children's progress
- (e) Co-operating with the administration of national and international assessment studies

The Minister has also asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to begin work on revisions to the curriculum and on the provision of additional resources to support the teaching of literacy and numeracy.

4. INITIAL AND CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy acknowledges that improvements to initial teacher education and better continuing professional development for serving teachers and principals are required to support the implementation of the strategy. The Minister is committed to ensuring that relevant and focussed continuing professional development opportunities will be provided for teachers during the lifetime of the Strategy.

Work has already commenced on this task:

- The Teaching Council is advancing the changes to initial teacher education and in summer 2011 over 12,000 primary teachers participated in an increased number of summer professional development courses that focussed on literacy and numeracy
- A national programme of continuing professional development courses for principals commenced in autumn 2011. Details of the courses are being made available to schools from the Professional Development Service for Teachers
- Specific units on the teaching of literacy and numeracy and the use of assessment have been developed and included within the induction programme that is now available to all newly qualified teachers during their probationary period. Principals are asked to encourage all newly qualified teachers to participate fully in the induction programme.

5. INCREASING TIME FOR LITERACY AND NUMERACY

5.1 An increased time allocation for literacy and numeracy

The *National Strategy* provides that the time spent in developing literacy and numeracy skills at primary level should be increased. This emphasis on literacy and numeracy was strongly endorsed in the consultation on the strategy.

The Department has asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to review the suggested timeframe in the *Primary School Curriculum* in the light of the need to increase the time for literacy and numeracy.

5.2 Immediate adjustment to time for literacy and numeracy

Pending the adjustments to the existing recommended timeframe by the NCCA and with effect from January 2012 all primary schools will be required to:

- ***increase the time spent on the development of literacy skills, particularly in the first language of the school, by one hour overall for language (Irish and English) per week (i.e. to 6.5 hours for infants with a shorter day, and to 8.5 hours per week for students with a full day)***
- ***increase the time spent on mathematics by 70 minutes per week to 3 hours and 25 minutes per week for infants with a shorter day, and to 4 hours and 10 minutes per week for students with a full day.***

You are requested to make provision for these arrangements in your school through a combination of approaches such as:

- ***integrating literacy and numeracy skills with other curriculum areas***
- ***using some or all of discretionary curriculum time for literacy and numeracy activities***
- ***re-allocating time spent on the other subjects in the curriculum to the development of literacy and numeracy***
- ***prioritising the curriculum objectives which are considered most valuable in supporting children's learning and delaying the introduction of elements of some subjects (for example, by delaying the introduction of strands and strand units from the history and geography curriculum for the infant classes and first and second classes to later in the primary cycle).***

An agreed whole school approach should be recorded in the School Plan so that individual teachers' planning can be aligned with the decisions made at school level. (The Curriculum Planning Tool at www.nccaplanning.com provides support for teacher planning and promotes planning for integration by allowing searches for key words across the entire curriculum).

This increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy is not intended to lead to a narrowing of the curriculum: for example, while language lessons will provide some of the main opportunities to develop literacy skills, literacy can also be taught through many other aspects of the curriculum.

6. ASSESSING CHILDREN'S LITERACY AND NUMERACY ACHIEVEMENT

6.1 The role that assessment should play

Gathering evidence about how well students are learning, and using this information to improve the learning opportunities provided for them are essential elements in ensuring that each student makes good progress in developing literacy and numeracy skills. This process of gathering and using assessment data should begin at the level of the individual student to

enable the teacher to adjust instruction to suit the needs of individual learners and to inform them and their parents about the progress that they are making.

Gathering and using assessment data also needs to take place at the level of the school, where principals, teachers and boards of management can use this information to identify how well they are providing for the literacy and numeracy needs of individual students and groups of students in the school and how best they can improve the learning in the school.

Assessment data is also needed to inform national educational policy for literacy and numeracy and identify ways of improving the performance of the school system. The literacy and numeracy strategy is designed to improve significantly the collection and analysis of information about students' learning in literacy and numeracy.

6.2 Guidelines on assessment

Assessment in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools was developed by the NCCA and issued to all teachers in primary schools at the end of 2007. The guidelines provide advice to schools on how best to fulfil Section 22 of the Education Act which requires schools "to regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents". The guidelines are available to download from the website www.ncca.ie under Publications.

6.3 Assessment for learning and assessment of learning approaches

The NCCA guidelines provide practical advice on developing a school's assessment policy based on two assessment approaches:

- *Assessment for Learning* takes place when the teacher shares information about the child's learning with the child and when the teacher uses this information to plan the next steps in their teaching and in the student's learning
- *Assessment of Learning* is used to provide a summary of what the student has achieved at fixed points, such as at the end of a period of study, or when a unit of work is completed, or at the end of an academic year. Information from assessment of learning can be used to report to others, such as parents and other teachers.

Schools should use a balanced combination of *assessment for learning* and *assessment of learning* practices. Detailed advice on both types of assessment is contained in the NCCA guidelines, *Assessment in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools*.

School management and staff are requested to review their assessment policies and practices in the light of the NCCA publication, Assessment in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools and the requirements of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

6.4 Standardised testing

One element of assessment is standardised testing. Circular 0138/2006 required all schools to implement standardised testing in English reading and mathematics at two points in the primary cycle. This approach has been reviewed as part of the development of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Following widespread consultations on the national literacy and numeracy strategy, the Minister has determined that the arrangements for standardised testing should be amended as follows:

- ***English-medium schools will be required to implement standardised testing in English reading and Mathematics during the period May/June for all students in 2nd, 4th and 6th classes with effect from 2012 onwards***
- ***Irish-medium schools will be required to implement standardised testing in Irish reading, English reading and Mathematics during the period May/June for all students in 2nd, 4th and 6th classes with effect from 2012 onwards***

You are requested to ensure that standardised testing is implemented in your school on an annual basis in the relevant classes beginning in May/June 2012.

Students may be excluded from standardised testing if in the view of the school principal they have a learning or physical disability which would prevent them from attempting the tests or, in the case of migrant students, where the level of English required in the test would make attempting the test inappropriate.

6.5 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 curriculum.

6.6 Grants available

The grant for test instruments, scoring and manuals will be adjusted to take account of the additional testing point, and the payment date will be advanced from December 2012 to April 2012.

The funds may be used to purchase test instruments and materials such as teachers' manuals, test scoring services or test-related software offered by test providers. Any funds remaining after the standardised testing costs have been met may be spent on diagnostic tests in accordance with a school's needs.

6.7 Maintenance of records

For students in the selected classes, the results of the standardised tests should be maintained carefully by the school and should be available for inspection by Department officials.

7. REPORTING AND USING THE RESULTS OF ASSESSMENTS TO IMPROVE PUPIL LEARNING

7.1 Reporting to parents

Parents play a critical role in supporting their children's learning. Schools can strengthen the capacity of parents to support their children in this way by sharing meaningful information with parents about the progress that children are achieving in the education system. This information needs to draw on the different sources of evidence that teachers use, such as conversations with the learner, examination of students' own self-assessment data, documented observations of the learner's engagement with tasks, outcomes of other assessment tasks and tests, and examples of students' work. In turn, parents will often be able to enrich teachers' knowledge of their students' progress through providing further information about the students' learning at home.

7.2 Report card templates

Schools should help parents to understand fully the evidence of learning that the school reports to them, especially information from standardised tests. The NCCA has provided a range of standard report templates to assist schools in reporting information about the progress of primary pupils to parents, including information from standardised tests. The NCCA report card templates were developed through a process of consultation with schools and parents and take account of research commissioned by the NCCA.

The report cards provide for reporting in four key areas:

- the child's learning and achievement across the curriculum
- the child's learning dispositions
- the child's social and personal development
- ways in which parents can support their child's learning

All primary schools must use one of the report card templates (available at www.ncca.ie) for reporting to parents on students' progress and achievement at school with effect from the date of this circular.

7.3 How often should schools report to parents?

By maintaining regular contact with parents about their children's learning, schools can help parents to support their children's learning and progress. This regular contact and the flow of information between parents and the school can take place in a wide variety of ways. Many schools have found that a whole-school policy on links with parents can greatly assist in strengthening this important relationship.

While schools will communicate frequently with parents about their children's learning, principals and teachers are required to report on children's progress to their parents twice during each school year:

- ***One of these reporting events must include a written report at the end of the school year presented in the format of one of the NCCA report templates described above***
- ***The other reporting event may include a meeting, or a meeting and a written report***
- ***The results of any standardised test administered by the school must be included on the report template. (Under the Data Protection Act (1998 & 2003), parents are entitled to the results for their children of any standardised tests that a school has administered.) The results of standardised tests must be recorded in a separate section of the child's report card either as a standard score³ or as a STen score⁴***
- ***Schools must issue written reports to parents in sufficient time before the closure of the school for the summer vacation to allow parents a reasonable opportunity to seek meetings with the principal and/or teacher(s) to discuss the written report if necessary.***

7.4 How can schools help parents to understand the results of standardised tests?

The report template provides space to record the results of standardised tests and space for a brief comment on the test score. The NCCA has published explanatory leaflets for parents entitled *Your Child and Standardised Testing*. Separate leaflets for STen scores and standard scores are available on the NCCA website, www.ncca.ie. Information on interpreting and reporting standardised test results is also provided on pages 60-65 of the NCCA publication *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum – Guidelines for Schools* (2007).

Schools should provide parents with copies of the NCCA explanatory leaflets when issuing written reports to parents.

³ Standard scores are transformations of raw test scores and usually range from 55 to 145, with a mean (average) of 100

⁴ STen scores are a ten-point scale derived from standard scores, with 1 representing the lowest category and 10 the highest. (An extensive description of interpreting standardised test scores is provided in Section 2 of the NCCA *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum – Guidelines for Schools* (2007).

7.5 Reporting, analysing and using assessment information at school level

Aggregated assessment information for classes or groups in a school can be a very important source of evidence for a school community as it seeks to improve teaching and learning. Effective schools analyse data from standardised tests and other sources regularly and track trends over time. They track not only the general achievement of all students but also the achievement of particular groups, including more able students and vulnerable groups who are at risk of encountering learning difficulties.

Effective schools use the data from assessment to identify priorities for their development including changes they may wish to make in teaching approaches, their priorities for staff development and for the acquisition of resources. They also use assessment information as part of their monitoring of the effectiveness or otherwise of the initiatives that they put in place to improve students' learning.

Teachers, principals and boards of management should use assessment information, including information about literacy and numeracy, to inform their school self-evaluation, reflective practices and their school improvement plans.

7.6 Limitations on using aggregated data

It is important to note that there are some limitations to the inferences that can reliably be made when making comparisons based on the results of a small number of student assessments. For example, there is a greater possibility that chance factors will influence the aggregate scores of tests when the number of students tested is small. Inferences from comparisons are more reliable when the numbers assessed are in the region of ten students or more at each class level, especially when comparing trends in achievement over time or in comparing results with those of similar schools.

7.7 Reporting information from standardised tests to boards of management

Boards of management can play a key role in encouraging a reflective school culture in which the principal, staff and board review practice regularly and seek to improve the quality of teaching and pupils' learning outcomes. This sort of culture is essential to improve attainment in literacy and numeracy. Reviewing regularly the general standard of learning outcomes makes an important contribution to this process.

Under the provisions of section 9(k) the Education Act, 1998, schools must monitor the attainment levels and academic standards of students as part of their ongoing monitoring of school effectiveness.

With effect from 1 June 2012:

- ***Principal teachers in primary schools are required to report annually aggregated assessment data from standardised tests to the board of management of their schools***
- ***The report will comprise the aggregated results of standardised tests administered in accordance with this circular. A copy of the form for reporting test results is appended to this circular.***

7.8 Reporting assessment results to other schools

Transferring assessment information between schools, for example, when pupils move to another primary school or transfer to a post-primary school, is important to ensure continuity of learning for pupils.

With effect from 1 June 2012:

- ***The principal of each primary school must send a copy of the end-of-year report card (including the information from standardised tests) to the primary or second-level school to which a student transfers***
- ***This information should only be provided after enrolment in the primary or second-level school has been accepted***
- ***Legislative arrangements have been made to provide for sharing information on progress, including the results of standardised tests, where students transfer from one school to another. The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 (Section 28) and the (Prescribed Bodies) Regulations 2005 allow schools to share relevant information concerning a child transferring between recognised schools without breaching data protection law.***

7.9 Reporting standardised test results to the Department of Education and Skills

Data on student achievement is essential to inform national education policy and to identify ways of improving the performance of the education system.

With effect from 1 June 2012:

- ***Primary schools will be required to report aggregate standardised test results to the Department of Education and Skills once annually***
- ***The aggregate results for each class should be recorded following completion of standardised assessments of reading and mathematics in second, fourth and sixth classes in May/June of each year***
- ***The template for reporting to boards of management (included in the appendix) will be used to collect the data***
- ***The Department will not collect assessment information on individual students from schools***
- ***The Department will consult with the relevant partners on the most manageable methods by which the data may be collected and schools will be informed of the administrative arrangements for the collection of the data before June 2012***
- ***Please note that there is no intention to publish data for individual schools or to enable the data to be used for the compilation of league tables.***

8. NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

8.1 The National Assessments of Mathematics and Reading

For a number of years, the Educational Research Centre has conducted periodic National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading. The last such assessments were conducted in 2009.

These assessments are based on the testing of a scientifically constructed sample of schools and pupils. No individual school results are identifiable in this process.

The assessments provide important additional national information on attainment in mathematics and reading and on a range of factors that may affect attainment, including, for example, changes in methodology or curriculum, the impact of socio-economic factors, etc. They also allow trends over time to be monitored.

8.2 International assessments

From time to time, Ireland participates in international studies that examine the attainment of students in literacy, numeracy and other subjects. Like the national assessments, these studies are based on a scientifically selected sample of students and schools, and no individual school results are identifiable in this process. The most recent international studies in which Irish primary pupils and schools participated were the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Studies like these provide important comparative information about the attainment of students in Ireland and about the factors that can affect student learning.

8.3 Participation in national and international assessments

The sample schools for inclusion in national and international assessments are selected on a scientific basis in order to ensure that appropriate proportions of different schools are included (for example, small, medium and large schools; DEIS and non-DEIS schools; girls-only schools, boys-only schools and co-educational schools; English-medium schools and Irish-medium schools; and at post-primary level, voluntary secondary schools, community and comprehensive schools and schools in the VEC sector). This ensures that the data from the assessments is genuinely representative of the Irish school system.

In order to ensure that the national and international assessments are based on scientifically selected samples of pupils and schools, schools will be required to cooperate with such national and international testing where requested to do so by the Minister for Education and Skills with effect from the date of this circular.

9. SUMMARY CHECKLIST OF REQUIREMENTS

You are requested to make provision for the requirements of this circular in your school by:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>increasing the time spent on literacy to 6.5 hours per week for the infant classes and 8.5 hours per week for the students with a full day</i> | <i>See Section 5.2 for details</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>increasing the time spent on mathematics to 3 hours 25 minutes per week for infant classes and to 4 hours and 10 minutes per week for students with a full day</i> | <i>Section 5.2</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>reviewing the assessment policy of your school to ensure that it is fully informed by the NCCA publication, Assessment in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools (2007) and the requirements of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy</i> | <i>Section 6.2 and Section 6.3</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>implementing standardised testing in the period May/June for 2nd, 4th and 6th class students, from 2012 onwards</i> | <i>Section 6.4</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>maintaining carefully the results of standardised tests in the school and making these available to Department officials for inspection</i> | <i>Section 6.7</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>reporting to parents on the progress of their children using the NCCA templates for this purpose and by including the results of any standardised testing undertaken on the report cards. (The NCCA has developed information leaflets for parents explaining standardised test results (www.ncca.ie) which should be enclosed with the reports)</i> | <i>Sections 7.1 to Section 7.4 inclusive</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>providing copies of pupils' report card information and standardised test results to the principals of schools to which pupils transfer; (at the end of sixth class or earlier); this information to be transferred to the new school only following the pupil's enrolment in that school</i> | <i>Section 7.8</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>using standardised test results in reading and mathematics and other assessment information to inform your school's self-evaluation and school improvement plan</i> | <i>Sections 7.5-7.6</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>arranging for aggregated results of standardised tests conducted in your school to be reported to the board of management and the Department of Education and Skills once annually</i> | <i>Sections 7.8-7.9</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>co-operating with requests from the Minister for Education and Skills to participate in national and international assessments of pupil achievement.</i> | <i>Section 8.3</i> |

APPENDIX

EXAMPLE OF FORMAT OF REPORT OF AGGREGATE STANDARDISED TEST RESULTS TO BE SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS FROM JUNE 2012 ONWARDS

Roll number		County		School	
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ENGLISH READING

Please enter the number of students in second, fourth and sixth classes whose **scores** on a standardised test of English reading fall within the following ranges in respect of tests undertaken in May/June 2012:

Class	STen 1- 3	STen 4	STen 5	STen 6	STen 7	STen 8 - 10	Numbers of pupils excluded from test	Total enrolment in class	Test administered
Second class									Drumcondra Reading Test or Micra-T Reading Test
Fourth class									Drumcondra Reading Test or Micra-T Reading Test
Sixth class									Drumcondra Reading Test or Micra-T Reading Test

Roll number		County		School	
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IRISH READING (FOR USE ONLY IN IRISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS)

Please enter the number of students in second, fourth and sixth classes whose **scores** on a standardised test of Irish reading fall within the following ranges in respect of tests undertaken in May/June 2012:

Class	STen 1- 3	STen 4	STen 5	STen 6	STen 7	STen 8 - 10	Numbers of pupils excluded from test	Total enrolment in class	Test administered
Second class									Drumcondra Reading Test
Fourth class									Drumcondra Reading Test
Sixth class									Drumcondra Reading Test

Roll number		County		School	
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MATHEMATICS

Please enter the number of students in second, fourth and sixth classes whose **scores** on a standardised test of mathematics fall within the following ranges in respect of tests undertaken in May/June 2012:

Class	STen 1- 3	STen 4	STen 5	STen 6	STen 7	STen 8 - 10	Numbers of pupils excluded from test	Total enrolment in class	Test administered
Second class									Drumcondra Maths Test or Sigma-T Maths Test
Fourth class									Drumcondra Maths Test or Sigma-T Maths Test
Sixth class									Drumcondra Maths Test or Sigma-T Maths Test