



**IPPN Submission –
Draft NCCA Strategic Plan 2026-2029**

Prepared for:

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

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1 INTRODUCTION

IPPN is grateful for the opportunity to review the draft NCCA Strategic Plan 2026-2029 and to provide observations to the Council in its deliberations.

Having recently undergone a similar process to clarify who we are, what we do, how we do it and why we do it, IPPN believes it is well placed to offer feedback on the NCCA's Draft Strategy.

The draft strategy is very well structured, clear in its intentions and easy to read. This submission aims to provide feedback from a school leadership and management perspective. It is hoped that these observations and feedback will help to strengthen the final Plan and to clarify the Strategy. We would be happy to engage with you further if you would like us to clarify any of the points made.

2 INTRODUCTION AND EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

The positive statements in the Introduction start out the strategy on a good note, by acknowledging what everyone in the education sector has achieved in recent years. The context is helpful and the scale of ambition is clear from the outset.

The factors that will influence the Council’s work are clearly laid out and comprehensive, and a useful reminder to stakeholders of the breadth and depth of the work and its wide-ranging impact on society. It is good to see staff wellbeing highlighted as a priority, as well as that of the children we all serve.

In moving forward, successful implementation will depend on sustained professional learning, adequate resourcing, time for collaboration, and clear communication. With these supports in place, we are confident that this next phase of curriculum development can strengthen coherence across sectors and further empower children and young people to flourish in an increasingly complex world.

As NCCA marks its 25th anniversary, this moment of reflection presents an important opportunity to ensure that curriculum development processes are collaborative, evidence-informed and responsive to school realities.

3 MISSION, VISION, VALUES

From IPPN’s perspective, the alignment between vision, mission and values is evident. Schools’ and school leaders’ mission is precisely the same as the Council – *to enable children to thrive*. Indeed, that is also the stated mission of IPPN – *‘Empowered leadership helping all children to thrive’*.

What is often not acknowledged in strategy documents are the barriers that get in the way of schools achieving these priorities. These barriers are captured in numerous studies and reports, including the UNESCO GEM Report - inadequate resources, lack of time for leadership and too many initiatives that do not take into account schools’ context and improvement plans around the curriculum and children’s learning. Ideally, this would be reflected in some way in the strategy. See below re. functions.

The challenge and opportunity now lie in implementation. For schools to fully realise this vision, sustained investment in professional learning, time for collaboration, clarity of communication and alignment across policy initiatives will be essential.

Overall, these statements articulate an ambitious yet grounded direction for curriculum and assessment in Ireland. As school leaders, we welcome the opportunity to continue working in partnership with the NCCA to ensure that curriculum development remains responsive, inclusive and firmly centred on enabling every child and young person to thrive.

4 REMIT AND STRUCTURE

4.1.1 Functions

The Education Act (1998) as it impacts on the role of the NCCA is referenced in the draft Strategy.

Section includes the function of the Council:

(e) from time to time to review the in-service training needs of teachers, including needs arising from the introduction of new curricula, subjects or syllabuses in schools, and to advise the Minister in relation to those needs;

(3) In carrying out its functions the Council shall—(d) have regard to the practicalities of implementation of any advice which it proposes to give to the Minister.

IPPN believes that these sections and subsections empower the NCCA to be a real and powerful agent for change in the system. This is particularly true where the Council sees the impact of an environment that does not allow school leaders and leadership to focus on its core purpose of leading teaching and learning because of lack of time and space to lead and because they are not adequately supported by a governance structure that is fit for purpose.

It would be very helpful for the Council to include statements about its intention to highlight to the minister and the Department where approaches to training in respect of curriculum implementation fall short of best practice, and where resources fall short of what is needed.

4.1.2 School leadership representation

Council members 'are nominated by the education partners who represent teachers, early childhood educators, school managers, parents, business interests, trade unions, Irish language organisations, special education, and other educational interests.'

The system relies heavily on school leaders to be agents of change in relation to curriculum enactment, yet they are not represented at Council level in NCCA. School management bodies necessarily have a different focus to that of school leadership organisations. Neither IPPN nor NAPD existed when the NCCA was established in 1984 and that possibly explains the absence of school leaders on NCCA's Council. However, given the pivotal role of school leaders in curriculum enactment, the omission of school leadership from the membership of the Council warrants review.

5 STRATEGIC GOALS

5.1 GOAL 1: CURRICULUM REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT

Strategic Goal 1 reflects a thoughtful and progressive direction for curriculum review and development. Its success, however, will depend on deep, sustained partnership with schools. As school leaders, we are ready to contribute our expertise, practical insight and commitment to ensuring that curriculum reform genuinely supports progression, inclusion and excellence for all learners. By embedding leadership voices at every stage from design through enactment to review this goal can move from strategic ambition to transformative practice.

From a school leader's perspective, this goal presents a coherent and ambitious roadmap for curriculum review and development. The emphasis on progression across sectors and educational transitions is particularly welcome, as schools experience first-hand the challenges and opportunities that arise at key transition points early childhood to primary, primary to post-primary, and beyond. However, for this goal to be fully realised, it is essential that school leaders and practitioners are not only consulted but actively embedded as partners throughout each stage of the process.

5.1.1 Cyclical, Systematic Curriculum Review

The move toward a more cyclical and systematic approach to curriculum review is strongly supported. Schools benefit from structured, predictable review cycles that allow for reflection, planning and capacity-building.

From a leadership perspective, meaningful involvement should include:

- Representation of school leaders and teachers in review panels and advisory groups
- Clear feedback loops showing how school input shapes revisions
- Realistic timelines

Without this embedded partnership, cyclical review risks becoming procedural rather than genuinely responsive.

5.1.2 Updating and Developing Specifications

We recognise the need to update specifications in response to emerging needs and policy priorities. However, alignment and manageability are critical. Schools are currently navigating multiple reforms; it is essential to avoid further overload. School leaders should be engaged early in identifying priorities for review, supported with impact analyses that consider workload and resourcing and provided with phased implementation plans

5.1.3 Irish Sign Language (ISL) Curriculum

The development of a curriculum supporting Irish Sign Language is a significant and progressive step. It signals a strong commitment to inclusion and linguistic diversity. Successful implementation will require investment in teacher professional learning and access to specialist expertise

5.1.4 Integration of Key Competencies

Completing the integration of Key Competencies across primary and post-primary education has strong potential to bring coherence and clarity to learning progression.

For schools, the priority will be:

- Clear exemplars of what competencies look like in practice
- Alignment with assessment approaches
- Professional development that builds shared understanding
- Time allocated for whole-school discussion and curriculum planning.

Support for enactment must go beyond documentation and include sustained engagement with school leadership teams. Supporting primary and special schools in enacting the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum is critical. Implementation is the decisive phase of reform.

From a leadership perspective, success will depend on:

- Time for collaborative planning
- Updated, practical guidance on inclusion and preparation
- Alignment with inspection, assessment and reporting structures
- Resourcing that reflects the scale of change.

School leaders must be active partners in reviewing and updating guidance, particularly in areas of inclusion and planning.

5.2 GOAL 2: ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING

Achieving its ambitions by 2029 will require far more than policy alignment. It will demand significant investment in time, professional learning, leadership capacity, and resourcing. Without these, the aspiration to align assessment with curriculum purpose risks becoming an additional compliance burden rather than a meaningful improvement in teaching and learning. Assessment reform is not simply a technical adjustment; it represents a shift in how we understand progression, professional judgement, and reporting. That shift must be properly supported. Promoting formative assessment across the continuum is entirely appropriate. However, embedding high-quality formative practice requires dedicated time for teacher collaboration and moderation, ongoing professional development in assessment literacy and Leadership time to coordinate and sustain practice

Currently, teacher workload significantly limits meaningful collaboration. If we are to strengthen professional judgement, teachers need protected time to complete this. This cannot be added on top of existing commitments without adjustment elsewhere.

5.2.1 Quality-Assured Exemplars

Replenishing exemplars is welcome. However, simply publishing additional examples will not automatically improve practice. Schools will need facilitated professional learning to unpack exemplars, structured opportunities to trial, reflect, and refine approaches, access to high-quality

national CPD, both in-person and online. Without structured implementation support, exemplars risk being underutilised resources rather than catalysts for change.

As school leaders, we are committed to improving assessment and reporting. However, we must be realistic: cultural and pedagogical change takes time. If the 2029 targets are to be meaningful rather than symbolic, implementation must be phased, properly resourced and balanced with workload and wellbeing. Assessment reform is central to curriculum reform but reform without resourcing risks inequity and inconsistency.

6 STRATEGIC ENABLERS

6.1 ENABLER 1.3

‘Work with partners in education, support services, institutes of educator/teacher education, and further and higher education institutions to build capacity for curriculum and assessment change.’

IPPN’s commends and encourages NCCA in pursuing this goal. The work undertaken by NCCA in developing and re-developing curricula is evidence-informed, well-researched and robust. It must be incredibly frustrating for NCCA staff to deliver such high-quality frameworks and supports, only to find that the system’s capacity to enact their work is not where it needs to be. IPPN and its members are seriously concerned about school leaders’ capacity to lead the enactment of the redeveloped curriculum for Primary and Special Schools under the current circumstances.

All evidence points to the fact that ‘impactful school leadership transforms the lives of children by enhancing their experience of school, the culture of learning and the quality of education’ (Leading for Impact 2026-2030 – helping all children thrive). Without additional space and time for school leaders to engage with middle leaders and teachers, the Department’s investment in the redevelopment of what is a wonderful Primary and Special Schools’ Curriculum may be seriously compromised.

6.2 ENABLER 6

‘We will communicate clearly and openly to build understanding, foster trust and ensure accessible, research-informed information reaches a wide audience.’

Communication would benefit from explicitly including goals around clear, concise and effective communication with teachers, curriculum leaders, school leaders and Boards of Management, as the key stakeholders who will be accountable for the implementation of the revised curriculum.

There are many mentions of ‘schools’ throughout the document. It would be helpful to mention teachers, middle leaders (assistant principals), senior leaders (principals and deputy principals) and school governance (Boards of Management) where this is what is meant, as these are the key school-level stakeholders that impact on outcomes for children and those who are most impacted by the work of the Council.

Taking into account the reality of school leaders is paramount, when more than half of principals have one day a week and 98% of deputy principals have no discrete leadership time to attend to all aspects of leadership and management, and far less than they want and need to address the aspects that align to their core purpose of leading teaching and learning. This will be particularly important over the seven-year implementation period of the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum.

IPPN and its members are seriously concerned about school leaders’ capacity to lead this work under the current circumstances. The Council’s Strategy could leverage its unique, independent and respected position in the system to support the development of an environment in which school leaders are truly empowered to undertake their roles as leaders of teaching and learning.

7 IMPLEMENTING, MONITORING AND EVALUATING THE STRATEGY

7.1 SUCCESS CRITERIA

There is a critical issue of capacity at school level. If NCCA outputs increase, professional learning demand on schools increases. Teachers and school leaders already operate within significant workload constraints.

Without systemic support, professional learning risks becoming an additional expectation rather than a supported opportunity. If professional development is central to successful implementation, it must be:

- Sustained support
- Accompanied by allocated time
- Coordinated with other national initiatives
- Delivered in ways that recognise diverse school contexts.

What types of KPIs/measures of success will the Council use in its Performance Management and Development System to track progress and ensure the achievement of objectives? It would be useful to clarify this.

Monitoring should not only measure whether outputs were delivered, but also lived experience from classrooms:

- Whether guidance is usable in practice
- Whether workload implications are manageable
- Whether reforms are improving learner outcomes
- Whether unintended consequences are emerging.

7.2 END-OF-CYCLE REFLECTION IN 2029

The commitment to reflect on impact at the end of 2029 is welcome. For this reflection to be meaningful, it should focus on:

- Evidence of improved teaching and learning
- Student progression and engagement
- Teacher professional confidence
- School capacity building
- Leadership capacity.

Success should not be defined solely by completion of strategic outputs, but by sustained improvement in educational experience. For the strategy to succeed, monitoring must move beyond compliance to focus on capacity, coherence and impact.