



TransformED

Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 Short Guides for Schools

Guide 1: What is curriculum?





Purpose of this guide

The term *curriculum* is often used to describe what schools teach, but curriculum is much broader than a list of subjects or topics.

This guide explains what curriculum is, why it matters and why curriculum reform has become such an important priority in Northern Ireland.

What is curriculum?

Curriculum is the central organising structure of an education system. It defines the knowledge, skills and experiences that children and young people are entitled to learn throughout their education. It also shapes how learning is sequenced and organised over time.

At its simplest, curriculum answers three important questions:

- What should young people learn?
- When should they learn it?
- Why should they learn it?

A well-designed curriculum helps ensure that all pupils, regardless of their background or circumstances, have access to important learning experiences and opportunities.

Three levels of curriculum

Curriculum operates at three interconnected levels.

System level

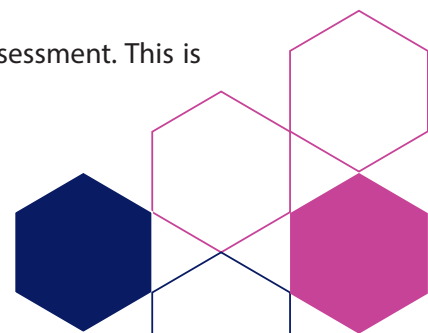
The statutory curriculum sets out the overall framework for what pupils are entitled to learn. It establishes expectations and provides consistency across the education system.

School level

Schools interpret the national framework and create their own curriculum plans. They decide how learning will be organised, what resources will be used and how the curriculum will reflect their particular context and community.

Classroom level

Teachers bring the curriculum to life through teaching, questioning and assessment. This is where pupils experience the curriculum directly.



The purposes of a national curriculum

A national curriculum serves several important purposes.

- **Providing a shared vision**

A curriculum reflects what society believes is important for children and young people to learn. It sets out the aspirations of an education system and provides direction for schools.

- **Creating a common entitlement**

A curriculum guarantees that all pupils are entitled to learn important knowledge, skills and experiences, regardless of where they attend school. This is a key aspect of educational equity.

- **Supporting progression**

A curriculum should help learning build over time. New learning should connect to previous learning so that pupils develop increasingly sophisticated understanding and capability.

- **Supporting assessment**

Curriculum expectations help define what pupils should know, understand and be able to do. This helps inform assessment and evaluation throughout the education system.

Why does curriculum matter?

Curriculum plays a central role in promoting both excellence and equity.

It provides a shared educational entitlement for all learners and helps ensure that schools work towards common expectations. Without a clear national curriculum framework, pupils' experiences can vary significantly depending on where they attend school.

A strong curriculum helps:

- provide consistency across schools;
- support progression in learning;
- reduce unnecessary gaps and repetition;
- prepare pupils for future learning, work and life; and
- ensure access to important knowledge and experiences.

While subjects are an important part of the curriculum, curriculum is not simply a collection of subject topics. A curriculum should be carefully planned so that learning is coherent and cumulative. It should identify the most important knowledge and ensure that learning develops in a logical sequence.



The proposed Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 places particular emphasis on ensuring that knowledge is organised within subjects and disciplines in ways that support long-term learning and progression.

Misconceptions about the statutory curriculum

It is equally important to understand what curriculum is not. It is not:

- a scheme of work;
- a timetable;
- a set of lesson plans;
- a teaching methodology;
- a qualification specification; or
- a collection of short-term initiatives.

The curriculum defines *what* pupils are entitled to learn. Schools and teachers retain professional responsibility for deciding *how* that learning is taught.

Discussion questions for schools

1. How do we currently define curriculum in our school?
2. Does our curriculum provide a clear learning journey and progression for pupils?
3. Are we clear about the different levels of curriculum?

Key message

Curriculum is much more than a list of subjects or topics. It is the planned framework of knowledge, skills and experiences that pupils are entitled to learn.

A well-designed curriculum provides purpose, coherence, progression and equity, ensuring that all young people have access to meaningful learning and future opportunity.



Recommended reading

- Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland curriculum
 - [Summary report](#)
 - [Full report](#) (chapter 4)
 - [Departmental response](#)
- Curriculum 2028: [Overview paper](#) (chapter 2)

