



TransformED

Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028
Short Guides for Schools

Guide 4: Principles of the new curriculum





Purpose of this guide

This guide explains the five principles that underpin the proposed Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028. These principles emerged from the Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum and have shaped the design, structure and content of the new curriculum framework. They are intended to ensure that the curriculum is ambitious, coherent, equitable and sustainable for learners and teachers.

Why are curriculum principles important?

The principles provide the foundation for curriculum design. They help ensure that decisions about curriculum content, progression, assessment and implementation are guided by a shared vision and a clear educational purpose.

The new curriculum has been designed around five principles:

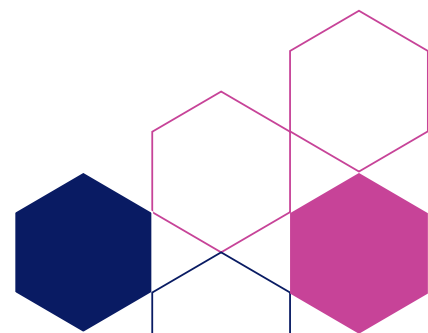
1. Purpose-led
2. Knowledge-rich
3. Continuous and coherent
4. Specific and focused
5. Inclusive and flexible

Together, these principles are intended to address many of the weaknesses identified in the current curriculum, including lack of clarity, weak progression, inconsistency between schools and curriculum overload.

Principle 1: Purpose-led

The new curriculum is explicitly purpose-led. This means that curriculum content is selected and sequenced because it contributes to the overall aim and objectives of the curriculum.

Each subject framework begins with a vision statement explaining why the subject matters and what it contributes to pupils' intellectual, cultural and personal development.



Principle 2: Knowledge-rich

A central feature of the proposed curriculum is its emphasis on knowledge. Secure knowledge is the foundation for understanding, reasoning, creativity and application across all subjects.

The curriculum is designed to clearly identify the essential concepts, knowledge and vocabulary that pupils should learn. This knowledge is viewed as a shared entitlement for all learners and is intended to reduce variation between schools.

A knowledge-rich approach is not about rote learning, memorising disconnected facts or restricting creativity. Instead, it aims to provide pupils with the knowledge they need to think deeply, participate confidently and make meaningful connections in their learning.

Principle 3: Continuous and coherent

The review identified weak curriculum progression as a significant challenge within the current curriculum. In response, the new curriculum has been designed to ensure that learning builds cumulatively over time.

A continuous and coherent curriculum introduces important ideas early and revisits them in greater depth as pupils progress through school. Learning is deliberately sequenced so that new knowledge builds upon prior learning.

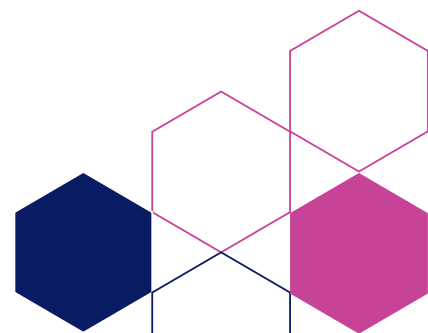
This approach is intended to strengthen transitions between phases, reduce unnecessary repetition and provide teachers with greater confidence about what pupils have previously learned.

Principle 4: Specific and focused

Curriculum expectations should be clear, focused and manageable. Excessive breadth and vague statements can make it difficult for teachers to identify priorities and can contribute to curriculum overload.

The new curriculum therefore identifies essential knowledge through clear “Pupils should learn...” statements. These provide greater clarity about what pupils are entitled to learn at different stages.

By being more specific, the curriculum aims to reduce workload for teachers, improve consistency and create more time for depth, consolidation and understanding. While expectations are clearer, schools retain flexibility in how content is taught and contextualised.



Principle 5: Inclusive and flexible

Many learners are disadvantaged when curriculum content lacks clarity and coherence because gaps in knowledge can widen over time.

The proposed curriculum seeks to support inclusion through strong sequencing, secure foundations and a focus on mastery. By identifying essential knowledge clearly and building learning progressively, it aims to improve access for all learners.

At the same time, the curriculum retains two important forms of flexibility:

- contextual flexibility, allowing schools to select examples, texts and resources that reflect their local context; and
- pacing flexibility, allowing teachers to adjust the speed of learning and provide additional consolidation where required.

The intention is to maintain a common entitlement while responding to the different needs and contexts of learners and schools.

What do the principles mean for schools?

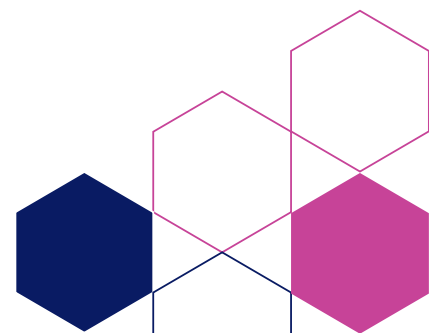
Taken together, the five principles represent a significant shift towards greater clarity, coherence and consistency across the education system.

For schools, they provide a framework for thinking about curriculum quality and curriculum development. They also offer a lens through which schools can engage with the curriculum consultation and consider the implications for their own curriculum planning.

Importantly, the principles are not intended to be viewed separately. They work together to support the overall aim of a curriculum that delivers both excellence and equity for all learners.

Discussion questions for schools

1. How well does our current school curriculum support the five principles? Where are the strengths? What will be the areas we want to develop most?
2. Which principle may be most challenging to implement in practice?
3. In what ways will the principles collectively encourage greater equity and excellence for all learners?



Key message

The proposed curriculum is built around five principles: purpose-led, knowledge-rich, continuous and coherent, specific and focused, and inclusive and flexible. Together, these principles are intended to provide a clear, ambitious and equitable framework for curriculum design, and teaching and learning across Northern Ireland.

Recommended reading

- Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland curriculum
 - [Five Principles](#)
- Curriculum 2028: [Overview paper](#) (chapter 5)

