

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

EDUCATION COMMITTEE – 5 FEBRUARY 2002

THE CURRICULUM : PLANNING AND FLEXIBILITY

Report by Director of Educational and Social Services

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1** To seek the agreement of Members of the Education Committee to the terms of an updated curriculum statement for schools.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** At the heart of the education service is the organisation and content of the curriculum. Advice and guidance on the curriculum is provided from a number of sources including Learning and Teaching Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Scottish Executive. During 2001 three significant documents were issued by the Scottish Executive which were of relevance in curriculum planning. These were:
- Circular 3/2001 “Guidance on Flexibility in the Curriculum”
 - Citizens of a Multilingual World
 - Better Behaviour – Better Learning: A Joint Action Plan

All three of these documents are of direct relevance in terms of planning the curriculum. As such their content and implementation is of central interest to schools.

- 2.2** In the wider background, the educational environment has experienced important changes in terms of the curriculum. The most significant of these has been the introduction of Higher Still which provides courses covering the complete spectrum of ability, accreditation of new areas of study, and in its own right offers a flexibility of application. At the other end of the age scale, curriculum planning is also a feature of expanded provision in the Early Years.
- 2.3** The issuing of Circular 3/2001 means there is now a focus for the curricular debate. Due to the significant changes over the last few years, the time is now right for the Director of Educational and Social Services to issue renewed advice to schools.

3. THE NATURE OF THE CURRICULUM

- 3.1** In Scotland the tradition, that has developed within a culture that historically values education, is that the curriculum is required to fulfil a number of expectations. Foremost amongst these are traditions that prize high attainment in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. These traditions have developed over the years into the idea that the curriculum, and school education, should provide an adequate preparation for life and work in a practical sense. Last, but not least, education should provide a broadly based

experience that is still consistent with classical ideals and that encompasses an appreciation of the Arts, but also leads to notions of tolerance and self respect. Recent publications on the curriculum confirm that these basic values in Scottish education have not changed.

3.2 Fortunately, in practice, much of the detailed discussion that might be created by the ideas in paragraph 3.1 has been covered recently in two key documents. These are:

- The Structure and Balance of the Curriculum: Guide for Teachers and Managers, published by the Scottish Executive in 2000.
- Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Schools, published by the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum in 1999.

It is proposed that these two documents, copies of which are available in the Members' Library, should continue to form the foundation and basic planning tools for the curriculum in East Ayrshire schools. Since these documents give helpful and practical advice on matters that essentially transform philosophical ideas into concrete programmes of learning they remain central to our planning. Moreover, continuing support for these two documents means that the basis of curriculum planning in East Ayrshire will continue to be comparable with other areas of Scotland, and subject to recognisable scrutiny by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HMIE).

4. FLEXIBILITY IN THE CURRICULUM

4.1 It has been recognised that a greater amount of prescription and restriction than is required has become built in to in school provision. This, it has been suggested had a two-fold effect. Firstly, the provision has not been necessarily suited to the needs of all learners, and secondly the natural creativity of teachers and head teachers was stifled.

4.2 The answer to this problem is provided by the introduction of the concept of "flexibility". The use of flexibility has been advocated at national level. It is therefore required that we consider the move by Scottish Executive to encourage the use of curriculum flexibility as a planning concept in East Ayrshire schools. It is also of great significance that the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act, 2000 states:

"Duty of education authority in providing school education

- (1) *Where school education is provided to a child or young person by, or by virtue of arrangements made, or entered into, by, an education authority it shall be the duty of the authority to secure that the education is directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential.*
- (2) *In carrying out their duty under this section, an education authority shall have due regard, so far as is reasonably practicable, to the views (if there is a wish to express them) of the child or young person in*

decisions that significantly affect that child or young person, taking account of the child or young person's age and maturity."

By implication, the terms of the Act confirms that there requires to be an element of flexibility to meet individual learners' needs, and views, and that therefore an overall prescription is likely to be inadequate without an element of flexibility.

4.3 Scottish Executive Circular 3/2001 gives guidance on flexibility by re-establishing the well rehearsed principles of curriculum planning. In other words that to be effective the curriculum requires to have:

- Breadth;
- Balance;
- Coherence;
- Continuity; and
- Progression

There will also, always, and in all circumstances, require to be due attention given to the core skills particularly of literacy and numeracy.

4.4 The Circular then goes on to point out that for the learner, it is the outcome that may be more important than the structure. Nationally, a new emphasis is being given on outcomes, most notably from the establishment of national priorities and their associated measures. While this flexibility provides a significant opportunity, it also poses a major challenge, since there is an inherent danger that a flexible curriculum could become a "second-class" curriculum. In order to address this important matter SEED Circular 3/2001 identifies 4 criteria which will be used by HMIE during inspections:

- *"there should be clearly identified educational gain for pupils based on a clear rationale and objectives and consistent with the National Priorities:*
- *there should be full consultation with stakeholders (including parents, teachers and pupils) and consensus before proposals are introduced; and*
- *rigorous quality assurance arrangements should be in place to monitor and evaluate the proposals and their implementation against the objectives and the results of these evaluations should be made available to the key stakeholders; and,*
- *there should be well planned implementation using development plans and action plans."*

4.5 In order to formulate a position in East Ayrshire, consultation with head teachers has endorsed this general approach together with a clarification of the way in which the educational gain for pupils should be established:

- Prior attainment of pupils must be recognised and built-upon;
- Experiences must be accredited;
- The possibilities for life-long learning must be demonstrably enhanced;
- Opportunities for enhanced access must be demonstrated; and
- Success in promoting inclusion must be evident.

In practice, therefore any school plans that are produced to exploit improved flexibility must be able to survive testing against the HMIE criteria together with those identified above. Those schools that use this flexible approach to curriculum planning should above all be able to demonstrate improvements in measures such as:

- attendance,
- exclusion,
- integration of children with special educational needs or behavioural difficulties,
- first destinations of school leavers,
- attainment of looked after and accommodated children,

in addition to improved levels of attainment or achievement.

- 4.6** In advocating the application of curriculum flexibility the then Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs had pointed to the need to make best use of teachers' creativity. This can only be achieved through removal of over-prescriptive approaches, and the rigid application of an imposed curriculum. So far as possible, teachers should be encouraged to experiment with new learning methods, and this is primarily done through "Learning and Teaching" policies or equivalent. However, in curricular terms head teachers should feel empowered to encourage staff to go into new subject areas that capitalise on their own interests and knowledge, but which, most importantly will enhance children's learning. In terms of traditional subjects there have already been highly successful introductions of innovative practice in areas such as geology, psychology, philosophy and minority languages such as Norwegian. There is no reason why this list should not be extended so long as the criteria proposed in this paper are followed.

5. SUPPORTING SCHOOLS IN THE APPLICATION OF FLEXIBILITY

- 5.1** Schools in East Ayrshire have the maximum flexibility to target resources to meet specific needs and stimulate innovation.
- 5.2** Similarly, there are already well-established systems of development planning and standards and quality reporting. These mechanisms are consistent with and complementary to the present proposals. Coupled with the arrangements for the delegated management of resources these mechanisms are powerful in ensuring that there is a stakeholder involvement both in planning and accountability.
- 5.3** The Quality Development Team are the principal and first source of advice on the curriculum for schools. They will continue to provide direct advice, respond to requests for support and organise in-service and staff development opportunities on the curriculum. Through their role in monitoring development plans they will support schools in the pace and direction of implementation of curriculum flexibility..

- 5.4** There are currently two New Community Schools projects running in the Authority. These form an excellent pilot vehicle for innovative approaches. Steps are already in hand to ensure that the good practice from these new approaches can be disseminated to other establishments.
- 5.5** It is proposed that schools should be able to capitalise on the relaxation of “Age and Stage” restrictions introduced by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). This will allow S3 candidates to take external examinations for Standard Grade, and S4 candidates to be assessed for National Qualifications. It will also be possible for schools to replace Standard Grade courses with the new National Qualifications where these are more appropriate in terms of meeting pupils’ needs or progression routes. In some cases schools may believe that there are appropriate forms of recognised accreditation outwith the SQA framework in which case they should be able to exploit these opportunities within the constraints of their own delegated budgets.
- 5.6** The Ministerial Action Group on Languages in their report “Citizens of a Multilingual World” introduced the idea of an entitlement in language education. Details of this idea of “entitlement” are given in Appendix 1 of this report. It is proposed that schools should be empowered to build this notion of entitlement into their curricular plans, thereby meaning that a study of a modern language to Standard Grade would no longer be compulsory so long as provision in this area met the requirements of Appendix 1.
- 5.7** Important opportunities are provided by the area of Enterprise and Education for Work. Such experiences which are innovative, based on practical problem solving and the promotion of skills that are useful for life can be important in motivating leavers. A standard approach to Enterprise and Education for Work is ensuring as a result of projects at national level in which East Ayrshire has played a lead role. Schools should be encouraged to capitalise on the use of these stimulating learning opportunities.
- 5.8** Based on these proposals, the Director of Educational and Social Services will draw-up a set of procedures in accordance with the terms of this report. This will enable schools to submit their proposals to the Authority for the use of curriculum flexibility for scrutiny, comment and approval.

6. LEGAL/POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1** If implemented, the terms of this proposal will enable schools to better fulfil their obligations under the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc Act 2000 and those that will follow from the extension of the Disability Discrimination Act to schools.
- 6.2** The aims of equal opportunities and social inclusion will also be promoted by this proposal.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Costs associated with any aspect of this proposal will be absorbed through school's delegated budgets.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 It is recommended that Members:

- (i) agree that "The Structure and Balance of the Curriculum: Guide for Teachers and Managers (5-14 National Guidelines)" and "Curricular Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Schools" should continue to provide as the basis of curriculum planning in East Ayrshire primary and secondary schools;
- (ii) endorse the criteria of breadth, balance, continuity, coherence and progression as being the fundamental principles on which an effective curriculum can be measured;
- (iii) agree that the criteria described in paragraphs 4.4 and 4.5 of this report must be fulfilled appropriately if flexibility in the curriculum is to be used either for individuals or groups;
- (iv) agree that schools can utilise the flexibility provided by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) in terms of "age and stage" and alternative qualifications where this better meets pupils needs or provides suitable progression routes;
- (v) agree that alternative means of accrediting pupils experiences can be used where this involves a recognised or authoritative awarding body;
- (vi) approve the concept of entitlement in modern languages for use in school curricular planning;
- (vii) agree that all proposals for the use of flexibility must be submitted to the Director of Educational and Social Services for approval;
- (viii) agree that the Director of Educational and Social Services establish a suitable mechanism for the scrutiny and approval of school based proposal based on the contents of this report; and
- (ix) otherwise note the contents of this report.

John Mulgrew
Director of Educational and Social Services

GRS/DL
7 January 2002

Members requiring further information should contact Graham Short, Head of Schools, (01563 576089).

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. "Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages, Guidelines for Schools", SCCC 1999.
2. "5-14 National Guidelines, the Structure and Balance of the Curriculum: Guide for Teachers and Managers", Scottish Executive and Learning and Teaching Scotland 2000.

3. "Citizens of a Multilingual World, Ministerial Action Group on Languages", Scottish Executive 2001.
4. "Better Behaviour – Better Learning, A Joint Action Plan", Scottish Executive 2001.
5. "Guidance on Flexibility in the Curriculum", Circular 3/2001, Scottish Executive 2001.
6. Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000.

Implementation Office: Graham Short

AGENDA