



Irish Primary PE Association

Cumann Corpoideachais Bunscoile na hÉireann

## **Position Statement on NCCA consultation in relation to redeveloped primary curriculum**

The Irish Primary Physical Education Association have engaged in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment consultation process and have formulated a position in relation to the following key elements pertaining to physical education in a redeveloped curriculum.

### *The extent to which the IPPEA agree / disagree with the proposals on minimum state curriculum time*

The IPPEA strongly supports the use of minimum state curriculum time. We are encouraged to see that Physical Education has been included within this category in the consultation document. It is of utmost importance that Physical Education is considered as a core element of minimum state curriculum time both in policy and practice.

### *The extent to which the IPPEA agree / disagree with the proposals on flexible time*

Whilst the IPPEA welcomes the principle of teacher professional autonomy through the provision of additional flexible time, we question the impact this may specifically have on the delivery of physical education. Research has shown that the current mandated allocation of 60 minutes of PE curricular time is not being delivered in a proportion of schools across Ireland (Woods *et al.* 2010, Department OF Education and Skills 2016, Research Work Group for Ireland's Report Card on Physical Activity in Children and Youth 2016). The IPPEA are concerned that additional flexibility in terms of curricular time could further worsen these figures.

A significant increase in flexible time could have a detrimental effect on the holistic development of some children, as particular schools may choose to assign all their flexible time across the year to one particular subject area to the detriment of others. This may lead to schools identifying themselves as a 'music school' etc. We believe that a balanced approach to flexible time which promotes holistic development without undue emphasis on specific subject areas, or a negative influence on the delivery of minimum state curriculum time could be beneficial.

### *The idea of specifying time allocations*

The IPPEA strongly believes that specific time allocations should be provided for themes/curriculum areas/subjects, in particular Physical Education. The available evidence suggests that Physical Education in a child's formative years can be an important influence on their physical, social and affective learning and their future physical activity patterns (Bailey *et al.* 2009). It is key to the development of lifelong physical activity and should be prioritised (Griggs 2007, Green 2012). Physical Education is an educational subject with

discrete learning goals and achieving the positive outcomes of a quality Physical Education programme (Irish Primary Physical Education Association 2010, McLennan and Thompson 2015) requires time to learn. Unfortunately Irish figures would suggest that children receive on average only 46 minutes of Physical Education each week (Woods *et al.* 2010). This figure pales in comparison to the global averages of 103 minutes weekly (UNESCO 2014) and European average of 112 minutes physical education per week (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2013). To put these figures in perspective, Irish primary schools currently spend only 4% of prescribed available teaching time on Physical Education, the lowest of any European county (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2013). In an effort to make progress toward time in Physical Education that has the potential to result in student learning, we request that the time allocated to physical education be increased as a matter of urgency.

In order to achieve the content of physical education and develop physical literacy some (SHAPE, 2010) recommend that children should participate in an instructional physical education program for a minimum of 150 minutes each week across the school year. Others such as the European Commission Expert Group on Health-enhancing physical activity recommends, for example, that pupils engage in PE on daily basis for approximately 1 hour (European Commission for Sport 2015). The IPPEA 2017 conference survey indicated that participants would support significant increases in the allocation of time to physical education in primary schools. The IPPEA believes that 150 minutes of physical education should be provided on a weekly basis to all children in Irish primary schools in order to achieve the benefits of a quality physical education programme.

#### The issues surrounding themes/curriculum areas/subjects (**Health and Wellbeing**)

A health and wellbeing agenda has become evident in the early childhood and second level educational frameworks in Ireland and is a national priority for the Department of Education. Although wellbeing is one of the central themes of the Aistear programme, research indicates that the implementation of the PE curriculum is in general weaker at the lower end of the primary school (Department OF Education and Skills 2016). Our experiences as an executive committee would also indicate that physical wellbeing is not a topic commonly explored by teachers as part of the Aistear framework.

The IPPEA 2017 conference survey suggests that teachers are uncertain as to whether Physical Education remain as a standalone subject or if it should it be integrated within a new Wellbeing theme/curricular area/subject. If the development of a wellbeing theme/curriculum/area/subject is advanced, the IPPEA would suggest the recent experiences of other countries (e.g. Scotland, Denmark) in educating for wellbeing should be considered (Thorburn *et al.* 2011, Thorburn 2014, Smedegaard 2016). Our connections with Scottish PE Associations (SATPE) would also anecdotally suggest that a combined time allocation for health and wellbeing subject can, for example, place PE on the periphery with some teachers choosing to spend more time on other areas of wellbeing. Physical Education lead teachers within schools could help ensure the subject is not left on the periphery in new structures on the redeveloped curriculum (Irish Primary Physical Education Association 2012).

The IPPEA believe that an integrated approach to health and wellbeing could be beneficial for students, provided that support is provided to teachers and a specific time allocation for physical education within wellbeing is protected and mandated for all teachers.

### The issues surrounding themes/curriculum areas/subjects (**Physical Activity**)

In addition to formal physical education curriculum time, the IPPEA believes there could be an opportunity within a redeveloped curriculum to provide time for daily physical activity breaks. In line with other countries such as Denmark who have adopted a multi layered approach to developing wellbeing, schools could be required to provide children with minimum amounts of physical activity breaks on a daily basis (Smedegaard 2016). These physical activity breaks could total 10 minutes daily, for example, and would be primarily classroom based (perhaps integrated with other themes/subject areas and used in transitions) leading to the accumulation of an additional 50 minutes of activity per week. The physical activity accumulated with transitional breaks combined with physical activity promotional practices at formal school small break and lunch breaks (Marron & Murphy, 2009) could contribute significantly to childrens daily physical activity accumulation. These positive practices along with regular quality Physical Education lessons taught by the class teacher where children learn cognitively, socially and affectively all contribute to children's health and well-being.

We emphasise in the strongest possible fashion, however, that physical activity is neither equivalent to nor a substitute for Physical Education.

### The IPPEA'S views on whether time should be allocated on a **weekly, monthly termly, annual basis**.

Within the NCCA curriculum consultation document time for physical education is allocated on a monthly basis. The IPPEA 2017 conference survey indicated, strong support for the allocation of physical education time on a weekly basis. Whilst the allocation of time on a monthly basis may be beneficial in a number of other areas, the IPPEA strongly believes that physical education should be allocated on a weekly basis for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the IPPEA believes that the 'blocking' of PE (i.e. teaching a monthly allocation of PE over 1 or 2 weeks instead of 4) would be a pedagogically ineffective practice. Physical education is a subject which in part seeks to develop motor skills. The development of these motor and fundamental movement skills require consistent levels of developmentally appropriate practice for pupils to develop muscle memory and competence. Accordingly pupils need the consistent opportunities and development provided by weekly allocation of physical education.

Secondly, the IPPEA also believes that the 'blocking of PE' would have a detrimental effect on the development of active behaviours and habits amongst pupils. The importance of daily physical activity for children is widely accepted with recommendations suggesting that children should receive 60 minutes physical activity daily (Department of Health and

Children Health Service Executive 2009). While school based PE is unable to solely achieve these targets, regular physical education classes can contribute to a child's physical activity levels.

Thirdly, a weekly allocation of PE time allocation makes it apparent to pupils and parents alike that regular physical activity is important. This message can help develop positive behaviours and habits amongst pupils as they come to realise the benefits of leading a physically active lifestyle. A monthly allocation implies that being active is not something we need to consider in our everyday lives.

Although allocating PE on a monthly basis would not prevent teachers from providing PE on a weekly basis, the IPPEA fears that monthly events such as 'sports days' or 'active day' could be introduced by schools to satisfy their curricular requirements within one/two days of the month. These days may be used in place of regular developmentally appropriate physical education classes.

*The extent to which the IPPEA agree / disagree with proposed changes to a three-/two-stage model*

The IPPEA supports moves towards a three stage model for the curriculum provided that teachers are supported through professional development. It would allow for a more gradual progression across levels and provide more clarity to teachers as to learning objectives across levels. This clarity may facilitate planning at a whole school level and allow for effective curriculum mapping. More clarity and detail is required, however, on the differences between themes/curricular areas/subjects.

IPPEA Executive Committee May 2017

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