

Consultation on the Welsh Government's progress in developing the new Curriculum for Wales

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders (Cymru)

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents 19,000 heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK.

ASCL Cymru represents school leaders in more than 90 per cent of the secondary schools in Wales.

2. ASCL has been a strong supporter of the proposed changes to the direction of travel for Welsh education first outlined in Professor Donaldson's "Successful Futures" report of 2015. Since that time, many schools led by ASCL members have enthusiastically participated in the preparations for a new curriculum, as Pioneer Schools, and have engaged with government officials and the consortia to help make it happen.
3. It is clear from feedback from our members that there is still a gap in preparedness between the Pioneer Schools and some others who are not. This position is highly variable across Wales and depends to a significant extent upon the willingness of both the middle tier to lead and manage these significant changes, the willingness of both the Pioneer Schools to share their experiences, and also the non-Pioneer schools to engage with what is going on. In the best cases this sharing of new ideas is happening well, in some others, non-Pioneer schools may feel they are left waiting and area as a result uninformed. In some schools, where hard-pressed leaders are struggling to absorb the range of changes in a system of narrow accountability that has impacted upon processing reforms there is still a long way to go.
4. Many Pioneer schools have made significant progress in designing a range of innovative curriculum elements. They have received some financial support, have been encouraged both by government officials and also, in some cases, by the positive approach of ESTYN to develop their ideas. Whilst there have been opportunities for sharing the work they have done, it has for some been at times a somewhat isolated experience where they felt that they have been developing ideas "on their own". Formal opportunities for working with other Pioneer Schools at conferences and as part of working groups have been welcomed and have been viewed as positive.
5. The "What Matters" statements have generally been regarded as a very useful tool for focusing discussions, developing a framework and pulling together the ideas developed in different schools. They have provided a means to ensure that the range of approaches can have common threads joining them together and demonstrate how different approaches can support the same end.
6. This methodology is radically different from the old "national curriculum" and is something that we have identified as an area that not all schools have yet fully understood. Members would welcome further exemplification of the "What matters" statement as we move towards implementation of the new curriculum.

7. The principle of defining achievement outcomes at progression steps is broadly understood and accepted. Whilst those involved in Working Groups and as Pioneer Schools may have a more detailed grasp of the way this is likely to work, there are a number of schools outside of these, for whom this is not so clear.
8. We are concerned that all funds for Professional Learning are held by the Regional Consortia and subsequently allocated to schools. We are not convinced that in all cases these funds are allocated in an equitable manner to all schools. It is our view that school leaders are the people who are best placed to decide how these sums are spent, and the money should be passed on a pro-rata basis immediately they are received by the consortia.
9. We were pleased to learn of the significant additional investment announced by the Welsh Government in professional learning for teachers to help with preparations for the new Curriculum for Wales. This, however, on its own is not enough, as schools are expected to fund ITE reform preparation and adopt a whole new approach to PTLs with some funding only available via the middle tier. Funding needs to reflect the needs for and of the whole system reform and not just one part of it. It must be remembered that this additionality will only have an impact if core budgets are not eroded, otherwise there is a real danger it will be swallowed up in staffing costs. The announcement from ESTYN of their willingness to suspend inspections at some point during the “lead-in” phase is also a positive step to enabling schools to prepare. Members would welcome some clarity on this measure, particularly a potential timescale and how Estyn will support the roll out of the new curriculum.
10. With regard to communication with schools and teachers of the curriculum development work being undertaken and the engagement of all schools (not only Pioneer Schools), there have been regular updates via Dysg and the Curriculum for Wales blog. However, there is a definite feeling amongst a number of schools that they need more specifics, and whilst we appreciate that there is considerable work going on behind the scenes, there is a perception that schools have been left waiting for detail since the start of the academic year.
11. We are aware that a range of schools are involved in testing and piloting some of the themes and concepts that are emerging from the developmental work that has been going on. This work is being led by the consortia and we are concerned that we have had little or no indication at a national level about progress nor the numbers and types of schools involved. It would be useful for the experiences and conclusions of this work to be communicated to all schools as soon as is practicable. This would assist all schools in helping all teachers to be prepared for the introduction of the new curriculum.
12. We are unclear about what, if any, level of involvement there has been of Higher Education Institutions in the development of the new curriculum. Our HEIs have the task of training the next generation of teachers and we feel it critical that they have a good level of understanding and support for the reform process.
13. With regard to progress in developing new assessment arrangements, our members are particularly concerned regarding the assessment arrangements for the end of Key Stage Four. It is already extremely late in the current accountability cycle, and schools do not appear to have anywhere near enough information. Whilst this may not be part of the “new curriculum” it sets the tone for future developments and is extremely worrying if this is to become the pattern. If the new curriculum is to succeed it is critical that there is absolute clarity regarding the format of these assessments to support our continued ambition for the highest levels of achievement in Wales.

Conclusion

14. As leaders of educational professionals, we are committed to doing everything we can to further the development of the new curriculum as part of the National Mission. We are, however, concerned that there may be a significant gap between the desire of schools to implement the new curriculum and their ability to deliver at a time when the level of funding for schools is causing significant issues and diverting their attention from the central focus of learning and teaching. It is clear to us that there will need to be a significant additional investment in overall funding if the aspiration to implement a world class new curriculum is to be achieved.
15. I hope that this is of value to your inquiry. ASCL Cymru would be happy to contribute to further discussions.

Tim Pratt
Director of ASCL Cymru
December 2018