

# Section 1 Key themes in education reform



# Developing the curriculum

Since the publication of *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015), an increasing number of schools are trying out new approaches to the curriculum and this trend has accelerated since the publication of the draft Curriculum for Wales in April 2019. Many of the schools that are making the most progress in preparing for curriculum change are schools that worked as pioneer schools<sup>1</sup> and are now 'quality improvement' or 'innovation schools'<sup>2</sup>. There are also good examples of creative and interesting approaches to preparing for the curriculum in schools that have not been involved directly in pioneer work.

Most schools that have started thinking seriously about preparing for the new curriculum took their inspiration from the four purposes and the principles first introduced in *Successful Futures*. Many of these schools were keen to start considering how they could apply these principles to their own school and began thinking about the sort of curriculum they wanted to design for their pupils. Reading about the schools featured in the *Curriculum Innovation in Primary Schools* report (Estyn, 2018b) and speaking to staff from those schools also gave many teachers and school leaders the confidence to start thinking about the various possibilities for preparing for a new curriculum in their own schools.

Collaboration within and across schools on curriculum planning has increased in recent years and this often brings significant benefits for teachers and pupils. For example, primary teachers often share expertise and work across year groups and phases to plan specific projects, develop their thinking or try out new approaches in an area of learning and experience across the school. In secondary schools, there are useful examples of teachers collaborating with primary colleagues to re-think some or all of the key stage 3 curriculum and to improve continuity and progression in schoolwork from Year 6 to Year 7 and Year 8 within the current curriculum. Cwmtawe Community School, for instance, works closely with its partner primary schools to plan challenging transition activities that help Year 7 teachers plan a curriculum that builds on the ICT, communication and creative skills that pupils already have at the end of key stage 2.

Many special schools and pupil referral units have a good track record of adapting the curriculum to suit their pupils. As a result of working closely with other professionals in health and social care, these providers often offer an individualised curriculum that is tailored to the specific needs, abilities and interests of their pupils. The curriculum is often practical and provides learning experiences that are meaningful to them and will prepare them well for the future.

Generally, primary schools are becoming less dependent on commercial schemes of work. They are more willing to think creatively to design bespoke projects relevant to their school and pupils. Those that still use

<sup>1</sup> For more information about pioneer schools, please see Welsh Government website <https://gov.wales/new-school-curriculum-overview>

<sup>2</sup> For more information about quality improvement and innovation schools, please see <https://curriculumforwales.gov.wales/2019/09/18/taking-your-feedback-forward-refining-the-draft-curriculum/>

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schemes tend to do so more flexibly, tailoring topics to meet the needs and interests of their pupils and by involving pupils in planning and making decisions about what and how they learn. Pupils in Ynysowen Community Primary School, for example, evaluate the curriculum each week and contribute imaginatively to planning the following week's programme of work. This motivates pupils to engage in a wide range of tasks. At Ysgol Gynradd Treganna, before planning a new topic, teachers and pupils work together to consider the activities they would like to undertake as part of their chosen theme, and how they would like to arrange their classroom environment to reflect the theme. This means that teachers plan a comprehensive and progressive curriculum, and create a rich and stimulating classroom to reflect the pupils' contributions.

The attitude to forthcoming change in most primary schools is increasingly positive. A majority of school leaders are becoming more confident to consider and try new approaches to the curriculum, to take measured risks that they feel may benefit pupils, and to evaluate the successes and failures of their efforts to continue to improve. The reduced emphasis on end-of-key-stage data in primary schools has helped and has been broadly welcomed. Schools have responded positively to the work of the Welsh Government, regional consortia and local authorities, and Estyn to create an environment that recognises the importance of the experiences and breadth of curriculum offered to pupils, supports creativity, and is not driven by an overly narrow interpretation of outcomes. This has begun to change the perception of school leaders and teachers about what matters in the education system and has driven improvements in primary schools.

Secondary pioneer, quality improvement and innovation schools are also fully engaged in thinking about and preparing for curriculum reform, but the appetite for change is less widespread in other secondary schools. Secondary staff are generally positive about the aims of the new curriculum, though uncertainty around the nature of future qualifications and accountability measures means that secondary school leaders are generally more cautious about preparing for changes to the content and organisation of their curriculum. Even so, a minority of secondary schools are beginning to explore different approaches to the curriculum in key stage 3, mainly by linking subject areas together more coherently, by organising interdisciplinary projects, or by rethinking the curriculum to provide better opportunities to develop specific areas of learning. A good example is Islwyn High School, where a 'Challenge Champions' programme in key stage 3 draws on a range of traditional subject areas to help develop pupils' creative, innovative, critical thinking and planning skills through one multi-disciplinary challenge. Another example is Ysgol Gyfun Bryn Tawe, where a teaching and learning committee is passionate about broadening pupils' cultural knowledge. By working closely with teachers, they have ensured a stronger emphasis on Welsh history and culture across the curriculum.

In many secondary schools, the range of subject and option choices offered at key stage 4 is heavily influenced by the nature of performance indicators. One example is the entry of whole cohorts of learners for skills or broadly vocational qualifications, often not taught by specialist teaching staff. While worthwhile for a few learners, these qualifications are generally unsuitable for the full range of pupils being entered. They are frequently delivered during form registration periods to mixed-ability groups by a form

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tutor, instead of using this time for care, support and guidance purposes. Also, the range of options at key stage 4 is restricted in many schools. In a few schools, the number of options available for the pupils' own choice is as low as two. This trend is often exacerbated by budgetary difficulties. The number of vocational courses being offered is now lower than in recent years and as result many lower ability pupils are following a diet of largely traditional courses.

## Qualifications

Over the last three years there have been major changes to the qualifications available to pupils at key stage 4, including changes to specifications, to assessment processes, and to when pupils are able to sit examinations. Our report '[New qualifications](#)' (Estyn, 2018d) discusses the changes to 2018, and evaluates the impact of the changes on schools. Our sector report on secondary schools includes our latest evaluation of outcomes at key stage 4.

AS and A level qualifications have also undergone change in recent years. At A level, the overall pass rate has remained stable and there has been an increase in the proportion of learners achieving grade A\* or A (Joint Council for Qualifications CIC, 2020).

There have also been significant changes to the way that qualifications are aggregated at a pupil, whole-school, local and national level to produce performance indicators. These changes make it difficult to analyse or present graphically pupils' outcomes at key stage 4 during this period, and like-for-like comparisons between years in many qualifications and indicators are not valid.

Changes to the curriculum will lead to further changes to the qualifications that are available to pupils. A timetable for the development of new qualifications is available at [Qualifications Wales, 2019](#).