Curriculum effectiveness

A guide for governing boards

January 2022

Contents

National Governance Association

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and governance professionals of state schools in England.

We are an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We are expert leaders in school and trust governance, providing information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning.

We represent the views of governors, trustees and governance professionals at a national level and work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies.

Introduction

The curriculum provides a framework for the content and subjects that pupils are taught, what they should know and be able to do at different stages in their education and by the time they leave school. Each school's curriculum is unique – it comprises all learning and other experiences that each school plans for its pupils, such as:

- lessons
- school routines
- school events
- learning outside the classroom

While **school leaders and teachers are responsible for planning and teaching the curriculum**, governing boards have a significant role in ensuring that every pupil experiences a curriculum that is broad and balanced, and which equips them with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life. This role can be linked to all of the board's core functions:

1. ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction

2. holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils, and the performance management of staff

3. overseeing the financial performance of the organisation and making sure its money is well spent

4. ensuring the voices of school stakeholders are heard

This guide explains how governing boards can collaborate with school leaders to review the curriculum aims of their school(s) and identify areas for development that align with their vision. It also sets out how boards can monitor and evaluate curriculum impact and be confident in discussing their approach during Ofsted inspections.

We encourage you to explore the range of complementary curriculum resources produced by NGA and our partners, which are designed to support conversations between boards and school leaders about developing aspects of their curriculum, ensuring that it draws out the potential in each and every pupil.

Academy committees (local governing bodies) in a multi academy trust (MAT) should refer to this guide alongside their scheme of delegation to determine their level of responsibility for the curriculum and establish which powers reside with them. Refer to your governance professional or clerk if you need further advice.

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1. Curriculum and assessment requirements

England has a national curriculum: a set of subjects and standards designed to provide pupils with the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens.

Local-authority-maintained schools are required by law to follow the national curriculum. Many academies are also required to follow it under their funding agreements. While some academies choose to follow the national curriculum to make sure they meet the standards by which they're inspected, others use the freedoms afforded to them to determine the offer to pupils.

The national curriculum is a **minimum** framework, meaning that schools are free to (and likely will) include other subjects or topics of their choice in planning and designing their own curriculum.

1.1 An overview of the national curriculum

The national curriculum is organised into four blocks of study and attainment called 'key stages' and 12 subjects, classified as 'core' and 'other foundation' subjects.

	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Key stage 3	Key stage 4
Age	5-7	7-11	11-14	14-16
Year groups	1-2	3-6	7-9	10-11
Core subjects				
English	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mathematics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Science	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foundation subjects				
Art and design	✓	✓	✓	
Citizenship			✓	✓
Computing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Design and technology	✓	✓	✓	
Languages		✓	✓	
Geography	✓	✓	✓	
History	✓	✓	✓	
Music	✓	✓	✓	
Physical education	✓	✓	✓	✓

Guidance on the statutory requirements for each subject within the national curriculum for primary and secondary schools is published on the GOV.UK website.

In addition to the national curriculum subjects listed:

- all schools are required to teach **religious education** at all key stages

- all schools should make provision for **personal, social, health and economic education** (PSHE), drawing on good practice

- all schools must deliver **relationships education** (in primary schools), **relationships and sex education** (in secondary schools) and **health education**

1.2 Assessment

Pupils are assessed throughout the compulsory stages of their education. This includes school-designed systems of ongoing assessment. In addition, statutory formal assessments are carried out for which government sets pupils expected levels of achievement. These are commonly viewed as the end points that schools wish their pupils to achieve through the various stages of the curriculum.

Stage	Age group	Assessment method and measures
Reception	Pupils starting reception (the first six weeks)	■ Baseline assessment of early mathematics and literacy, communication and language. ■ This age-appropriate assessment consists of practical tasks using physical resources. ■ It is used to measure the progress that pupils make from reception to the end of key stage 2.
Key stage 2	Age 10-11 (end of year 6)	■ National curriculum tests and separate teacher assessments in English and maths. (A sample of schools also carry out tests in science). ■ Pupils scoring at least 100 (scores are scaled) for national curriculum tests have met the 'expected standard'.
Key stage 4	Age 15-16 (end of year 11)	■ GCSE or approved equivalent qualifications. ■ Pupil performance at GCSE level is also measured using pupil attainment across 8 qualifications (known as Attainment 8). This is compared to the expected progress from key stage 2 (Progress 8) ■ Secondary schools are measured on the number of pupils that take GCSEs in a set of subjects known as the English Baccalaureate, which are intended to keep student's options open for further study and future careers.

2. How are governing boards responsible?

The governance handbook states that boards are legally responsible for ensuring that the curriculum planned and taught in their school(s) is balanced, broadly based, and:

- promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society – this includes promoting British values

- prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life

In order to fulfil these responsibilities, governing boards need to:

- be informed about their school(s)' curriculum

- support and challenge their school leaders to develop and improve the curriculum

- monitor curriculum implementation and the impact on pupil outcomes

3. Being informed about the curriculum

Being informed about the curriculum in your school or trust will strengthen the board's contribution to developing and improving it.

As a starting point, we recommend that you read the information that every school and academy is required to publish on their website (or on the website of the trust), which includes:

- what the curriculum aims to achieve

- what pupils learn in each subject

- the activities offered to enrich the curriculum, such as sports clubs and performances

- phonics or reading schemes, qualifications and courses linked to the phase of education

Other valuable sources of information include:

- the school's curriculum policy (if there is one in place – this is not mandatory)

- the board's strategy document and strategic priorities linked to the curriculum

- internal and external data that shows how the knowledge and skills that pupils gain is reflected in results from national tests and examinations

- minutes and feedback from curriculum committee meetings

- experiencing lessons and school events

- talking to leaders and teachers about the curriculum, how it supports learning (in and out of the classroom) and the progress pupils are making

- talking to pupils about the curriculum and what they learn

- feedback obtained from stakeholders (particularly parents) via surveys

4. Influencing curriculum development

Governing boards are in a unique position to influence and support curriculum development in their schools and trusts. They do this by:

- Agreeing (and reviewing) the principles that inform or underpin the statement of what their school or trust curriculum aims to achieve. You may refer to these as your curriculum principles or drivers.

- Undertaking integrated curriculum and financial planning (ICFP): a collaborative process for designing and resourcing a curriculum that is aligned with your vision.

- Asking questions and offering constructive challenge.

The curriculum should never stand still: leaders and governing boards should always be thinking critically about what is important for their pupils and the decisions that are taken about what to teach and why. They should have in mind the values of their school or trust (what it stands for), the vision they have for its future, and the strategy for achieving it. You can read more about this in our guide to Being Strategic.

4.1 Curriculum development in MATs

In a MAT, a key decision for trust boards is whether to centralise the curriculum or allow each academy within the trust flexibility to determine its own. There may be good reasons for offering differing curriculums, and certainly different qualifications at secondary level. The extent to which the curriculum can be standardised will depend on how similar the schools in the MAT are. For example, if they are the same phase, serve the same type of communities, are selective, special or have a religious character.

Depending on the location of the schools in the MAT, there may also be scope for offering trust-wide or regionally focused extra-curricular activities.

4.2 Strategic conversations about the curriculum

The following questions are useful to governing boards and school leaders when reviewing their curriculum principles and identifying priorities for development. Use the questions to prompt conversations about the curriculum in your:

- board meetings

- curriculum committee meetings

- board strategy days

- integrated curriculum and financial planning

- curriculum themed visits to school

- curriculum presentations to the board or committee

- stakeholder engagement forums (such as meetings with the parent council)

The questions should be used to inform decisions that lead to improvement in:

- teaching and learning

- demanding ambitious standards for all

- overcoming disadvantage and advancing equality

How does the curriculum relate to our vision for the school or trust?
Consider:

- what pupils should leave school knowing and being

- how this is reflected through the curriculum

(Faith schools will be guided by their founding principles, beliefs and denominational standards.)

What are our curriculum strengths and areas for development?
Evaluate:

- trends, patterns and issues arising from progress and achievement data

- feedback from pupils, parents and staff

- available research

- learning from other schools

How do we ensure the curriculum meets the needs of all pupils?
Specifically:

- pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or high needs

- the most disadvantaged pupils

- looked after children

- young carers

- pupils from different communities

- higher ability pupils

Have we developed a broad and balanced offer?
This should include:

- full coverage of the national curriculum as a minimum

- academic subjects

- vocational subjects

- subjects that provide a rich and rounded education, including music, dance, design and technology

- subjects that provide life skills and promote active citizenship

- content and learning materials that reflect different cultures, their heritage and history

- promoting equality and diversity through all subjects, enrichment and positive role models

Do our curriculum priorities support recovery from the impact of COVID-19?
This discussion should focus around:

- the assessment of what pupils learned during the pandemic

- the assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on pupils' physical and mental wellbeing – where is support needed?

- the emerging curriculum priorities (short and medium term) to address any learning loss

- engaging families and local communities in these priorities

- resourcing requirements (including specific CPD for staff)

- use of funding allocated to support education recovery (such as catch up premium and tutoring programme)

- how remote learning provision is maintained and utilised to support recovery

What is the role of enrichment in our curriculum?
Consider:

- the availability of different learning experiences, such as clubs, societies, performances and volunteering

- ensuring these experiences are inclusive

How do we support and enable curriculum development?
Review:

- required staffing structure and allocation of resources

- how ICFP and benchmarking is used

- clarifying expectations of leaders, teachers and other staff

- planning, prioritising and sustaining appropriate staff CPD

- the CPD provided to support subject-specialist teachers to sustain high quality provision

- the CPD and support provided to non-specialists to ensure consistent delivery

- how technology is utilised to improve/enhance curriculum planning, delivery and assessment

- how teaching makes connections between different subjects

4.3 Gain insight to inform strategic conversations

We encourage governors and trustees to conduct further research on specific curriculum areas to help inform their conversations. The resources listed below have been developed for governing boards to increase their knowledge and understanding of key areas of pupil learning and development.

Area of focus	NGA resources
The knowledge, skills and attributes that pupils need to manage their lives, now and in the future	**A guide to personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education** developed in partnership with the PSHE association
Increasing the physical literacy of pupils so that they are physically confident and can maintain a healthy lifestyle	A guide to **physical education and school sport** developed in partnership with Youth Sport Trust
Building cultural capital and planning rich experiences	A guide to **arts, culture and creativity** Subject-specific guides: **dance, music, and art, craft and design**
Providing pupils with a global outlook	A guide to **supporting modern foreign languages**
Preparing pupils for future challenges locally, nationally and globally	A guide to **environmental sustainability**: a whole school approach
Ensuring access to successful and enjoyable careers in any profession	**A guide to careers education and guidance:** how governing boards in secondary schools meet their statutory duties relating to careers guidance

Curriculum e-learning

Subscribers to NGA Learning Link can access more than 50 e-learning modules, including:

■ Progress and attainment: using your data to improve educational outcomes

■ Arts and Cultural Education: improving your school and its curriculum

■ Your organisation: understanding school structures and what children should learn

5. Monitoring and evaluating curriculum impact

Monitoring and evaluation is essential for governing boards to ensure that their schools provide a broad and balanced curriculum that delivers high quality education to all pupils.

- **monitoring**: gathering the information
- **evaluation**: exploring what the information is saying about progress and impact

5.1 Monitoring the curriculum

Boards use the following sources to monitor the curriculum:

Reports

The main source of information available to governing boards is the termly report from their executive leader. The report should cover the progress made on priorities linked to improving the quality of education for all pupils, which includes the performance and effectiveness of the curriculum. This might include, for example, feedback following the introduction of a new subject or investment in resources to support delivery of the curriculum. The report provides a basis for questions and discussion.

Reports provided by subject leads bring further insight to the monitoring and decision making of curriculum committees. Report frequency and format should be agreed between the board and relevant staff to ensure that information provided is useful and expectations are realistic.

Data

Governing boards have access to a range of data to help them monitor the education pupils receive. This includes the school's internal data, which tracks the attainment and progress (as well as behaviour and attendance) of different groups. Data provided by the Department for Education (DfE) also provides key headlines and comparative performance measures for pupils. The DfE has produced guidance to help governing boards understand their data and analyse reports in the school and college performance tables.

For trust boards, navigating assessment data across the schools in a MAT is essential but can be complex. Ongoing development and investment in a **centralised MAT data system** (which allows leaders to review the curriculum offer and its impact across all schools) should therefore be viewed as a priority.

The curriculum committee

Most governing boards appoint committees to carry out much of their business and report back to the full board. Appointing a committee that focuses on the performance and effectiveness of the curriculum will strengthen monitoring in this area if one does not already exist.

Curriculum committees tend to spend time analysing progress and attainment data and examining areas such as subject development, the impact of interventions and removing barriers to learning and success. They work closely with curriculum leads in their schools and trusts.

Link governors and trustees

Some boards appoint link governors or trustees to have oversight of key areas of their curriculum and or development priorities. For example, physical education, SEND and inclusion or the application of information technology. These individuals are often members of the curriculum committee, but they don't have to be. Before appointing link governors or trustees, the board should consider carefully whether the role is needed and if it adds value to their monitoring of the curriculum.

Appointing link governors and trustees does not remove the board's collective responsibility; boards should ensure that the area assigned is covered on the agenda of full governing board and committee meetings as appropriate, so that all members of the governing board remain informed of the key issues.

Visiting school and engaging with pupils and parents

Monitoring visits provide those governing with essential information on the effectiveness of the curriculum. A programme of governor or trustee visits can incorporate a range of activities including meeting with staff, experiencing a lesson or enrichment activity, and attending pupil and parent forums. From this, boards can gain valuable insight into:

- what pupils think about what they are learning and why they are learning it

- what parents think about the educational experience their children receive

- links with the local community, such as with employers and services

- what staff say about the aims, planning and sequencing of the curriculum

- what staff say about the CPD and support they receive to plan and deliver the curriculum

- what staff say about curriculum impact on workload and conditions

When compared, the different sources of information should tell the same story about the progress being made. For example, a suggestion that an area of the curriculum is good, or improving, should be evident in data and from external assessments. When that is not the case, the governing board should explore the issue and question the discrepancy.

5.2 Evaluating curriculum impact

The positive results of pupils' learning can then be seen in the standards they achieve. Therefore, when evaluating curriculum impact, boards should look closely at what information and data is saying about:

- the progress and attainment of all pupils

- how well pupils perform in assessments and examinations

At the same time, boards should be looking beyond the data for evidence of wider impact, linked to the educational vision. For example, evidence of:

- pupils being given well-rounded educational experiences (sporting, artistic, vocational)

- pupils gaining skills for life

- pupils enjoying and being fulfilled by the curriculum and this contributing to their wellbeing (for example a positive impact on behaviour and attendance)

6. Talking to Ofsted about curriculum

Ofsted does not have a preferred model curriculum or a set view about how it should be implemented; they recognise that this can be achieved in different ways.

Read our guide to Ofsted inspections for a full overview of the inspection process.

During an Ofsted inspection, inspectors will meet with staff responsible for planning the curriculum (both overall and at subject or topic level). They will also undertake activities such as observing lessons, looking at pupils' work and talking to them about their learning. From this they will establish what the curriculum is trying to achieve (the **intent**), how it is delivered (the **implementation**) and the difference it is making to all pupils (the **impact**). These areas are not judged separately: each must complement and support the other.

Governing boards will mainly be concerned with the intent and impact of the curriculum. When members of the governing board meet with Ofsted inspectors, discussion should centre around the board's core strategic functions and avoid operational areas – inspectors should not go into the detail of what is taught. However, the governing board should be prepared to discuss and answer questions about:

- **How the vision and values set by the board underpin the curriculum that is offered** – you might be asked about how the curriculum sustains engagement in and provides pupils with opportunities to achieve and contribute to a multicultural society.

- **The board's role in developing and improving the curriculum** – you might be asked to talk about decisions the board has made concerning investment in teacher CPD and how they support decision making on the range of subjects offered.

- **Strengths, areas for development and what the board has done to address them** – you are likely to be asked about the areas where pupils make good progress, the subjects where they don't make good progress and what is being done to address this.

- **How the curriculum caters for different groups** such as pupils who are disadvantaged, vulnerable pupils or pupils with SEND and if it is providing them with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life.

- **How the board monitors and evaluate the impact of the curriculum** – the data the board interrogates, curriculum monitoring roles and responsibilities, what the board has learned from visiting school, talking to pupils, teachers and attending events.

Useful resources

- Understanding your data: a guide for school governors and academy trustees
- Schools' approaches to education recovery in response to COVID-19: research findings
- NGA guidance - COVID-19 recovery: strategic priorities
- NGA's collection of curriculum resources
- A guide to pupil premium spending and impact
- A guide to Ofsted inspections

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