



CIRCULAR 18/99

To Boards of Management, Principal Teachers and all Teaching Staff of National Schools

SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING AT PRIMARY LEVEL

The Nature of School Development Planning

For some time there has been widespread acceptance among educationalists that collaborative school development planning is a powerful means of promoting school effectiveness and development. Increasingly, schools are actively engaging in on-going whole school planning in order to create optimum learning environments and to develop and implement the most appropriate curricular provision for their pupils.

School planning is essentially a process in which policy and plans evolve from the ever changing and developing needs of the school community. Since every school is unique in terms of its staffing, pupils, support structures, availability of resources etc.. the strategies employed in school development planning will vary considerably from school to school. In all cases, however, school planning has as its essential purpose the promotion of school effectiveness and improvement, and it should involve the collaborative effort of all the school's partners.

Existing Culture of School Planning in Primary Schools

Many primary schools have been engaged in school development planning for some time and a very large number of schools have formulated school plans. This development has been supported by the Department of Education and Science and other bodies. Schools have drawn on their own internal professional and other resources in the planning process and they have been supported by education centres, the In-career Development Unit of the Department of Education and Science and a range of professional organisations.

Definition of Plan

The school plan is a statement of the educational philosophy of the school, its aims and how it proposes to achieve them. It deals with the total curriculum and with the organisation of all the school's resources, including staff, space, facilities, equipment, time and finance. It also includes the school's policies on a diverse range of administrative / organisational issues and, where appropriate, the school's strategies for implementing official guidelines / circulars / regulations. The school plan serves as a basis for the work of the school as a whole and for evaluating and reporting on whole school progress and development. The school plan deals with the setting of targets and specification of achievement objectives in the context of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in school.

The school plan is a written resource document, which facilitates co-ordinated development within the entire school community. Such a document can only be arrived at through a process of interactive and collaborative dialogue within the broader education community. School planning therefore is essentially a process in which school policy and plans evolve from the ongoing and developing needs of the school and the community it serves. It is a dynamic process, which provides for constant review, design, implementation and evaluation.

The Education Act 1998 requires that Boards of Management in a school shall prepare and regularly review and update the school plan. The Act also states that the school plan shall be prepared in accordance with such directions as may be given from time to time by the Minister in relation to school plans.

The Benefits of School Development Planning (SDP)

The essential purpose of the school development planning process is to improve teaching and learning in the school through the successful management of innovation and change. The process benefits the school in a number of ways.

SDP is a continuous process that provides the school with opportunities to review its aims and values, its existing achievements and its development needs. Through developing an awareness of school effectiveness characteristics and school improvement strategies, the school can be enabled to strengthen its organisational arrangements and curricular provision.

SDP can enable schools to manage change through clarifying priorities. Setting targets and tasks, and generally bringing about a greater awareness of purpose. SDP also provides a clear reference point during review, monitoring and evaluation.

Recognising the context of the school and its pupils is central to SDP so that the planning process enables the school to respond more effectively to the needs of its pupils and local community while facilitating the incorporation of national and wider priorities into its work.

SDP fosters an increasing commitment to and ownership of the school policy. Effective school planning involves interactive and collaborative dialogue in which the principal, teachers, parents of pupils. The board of management and the patron seek to respond to the developing needs of the school.

SDP improves communication and fosters an atmosphere of Openness. It encourages principals to employ a consensual style of leadership. thereby cultivating staff ownership of developments and involving them in taking charge of and managing the pace of change.

SDP enhances the professional role of teachers: it provides support for and recognition of effective practice. the isolation of classrooms is overcome and a sense of collegiality is developed. SDP increases the feeling of being in control of events rather than being controlled by them.

Some Basic Principles of the School Development Planning Process

During the school development planning process

- the principal, in consultation and in co-operation with the teachers, will be mainly responsible for initiating, designing and formulating the school plan.
- some broadly based working groups, involving teachers, members of the board of management and parent association representatives, will be formed to deal with specific issues and themes.
- opportunities will be provided for teachers with specialist knowledge or skills to carry out specific tasks relevant to the school plan.
- questionnaires may be utilised to elicit opinions from various elements of the school community on aspects of the work and organisation of the school as a whole.
- the entire in-school management team and board of management will be involved in the management and co-ordination of the school development planning process.
- the Board of Management will ratify the school plan subject to the approval of the patron in relation to those aspects of the plan which concern the school's values and ethos.

Supports for School Development Planning

The support for school development planning to be offered by the Department of Education and Science includes the following:

- Provision of School Development Planning Guidelines
- Training of facilitators
- Regional seminars for schools
- Specific support for schools serving disadvantage areas

School Development Planning Guidelines

An internal departmental working party, guided by a consultative steering group representative of the partners in education, has prepared a booklet entitled *Developing a School Plan: Guidelines for Primary Schools*. This publication, copies of which are included, provides advice to schools on school planning. In particular it

- provides a model for school development planning in primary schools although it is emphasised that each school community is free to decide on the planning model best suited to its needs and circumstances;
- discusses the essential elements of the school plan;
- outlines the critical steps in the planning process and how they might be organised and managed;
- promotes a collaborative approach to planning involving principal, teachers, board of management, parents and, where appropriate, pupils;

- suggests a range of techniques and strategies which may be useful when organising meetings and working groups;
- provides a range of exemplar questionnaires to assist with school review and other resources;

Training of Facilitators

A national support structure for school development planning will be established. A national co-ordinator and four regional officers will be appointed together with a team of approximately 30 school planning facilitators. These facilitators will be trained and available on a phased basis to assist schools in the school planning process. A consultative steering group, representative of the partners in education, will oversee the work of the support structure team.

Regional Seminars for Schools

It is planned to hold regional seminars for disadvantaged schools outlining the school development planning process in the autumn of 1999. A separate notice of these meetings will be issued to schools in the near future.

Specific Support for Schools Serving Designated Areas of Disadvantage

As part of the £57m package announced by the Minister for Education and Science in late 1998 to enhance social inclusion it was indicated that £1m would be made available during 1999 and 2000 to help primary schools serving designated areas of disadvantage to respond more appropriately to the needs of their pupils through school development planning. It is planned to grant aid about 440 such schools in 1999 and 2000 on a phased basis (in accordance with schools size). Details of grant aid will be sent to the schools serving disadvantaged areas in the near future.

Department of Education and Science 1999