

EDUCATION PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE: CIRCULAR 10/65

CIRCULAR 10/65

Circular 10/65 was a national policy, issued by the UK’s Department of Education and Science (DES) on 12 July 1965, requesting Local Education Authorities (LEAs) submit plans for reorganising secondary schools on comprehensive lines, departing from the current tripartite system to the progressive format of Modern Comprehensive Schools (Circular 10/65, 1965). This new format was known as ‘The Organisation of Secondary Education’ and was designed to meet the needs of learners of all abilities and was therefore seen as a move to “non-selective education” (Bolton, 2013).

CONTEXT

This move to a more inclusive framework was largely fuelled by the change in the political landscape as the Labour party won the election in 1964, providing them with the opportunity to rearrange the education system in a way that reflected the values of the party. These values have been visible in the party’s policies since the 1950s, as their report, Learning to Live, ‘emphasised the idea of opportunity for all’ (McCulloch, 2016, p.24), a sentiment which is clearly reflected in the nature of Comprehensive schools as a provision that promotes a universal access to a high quality of education throughout adolescence.



Logos-world.net, 2019



Crocker, 2011



Catholic Relief Services, 2016

MOVE TOWARDS EQUALITY

Research conducted by the University of Cambridge (2018) found that grammar schools benefited a middle-class minority as opposed to serving intellectual students capable of high academic achievement, in addition to an inequality in the provision of grammar schools for boys and girls, with a higher number of these schools available for the former. In moving to a more inclusive structure through the encouragement of mixed-social-classes and mixed-ability classes, one may deduce that Circular 10/65 is a policy that promotes shared citizenship and equality. Comprehensive schools also provided students with greater mobility in their studies as academic, technical and commercial streams became untied under one institution, therefore reducing the rigidity of the 11+ selection process and creating greater opportunities for those who developed later, making them a ‘beacon of equality’ in the 1970s according to the University of Cambridge (2017).

INCREASED POPULATION

An increase in birth rates following the end of the second world war contributed to this shift in policy and a rapid expansion of schools. The University of Cambridge (2018) also noted that this inflation in birth rates was not accompanied by a proportional expansion in grammar schools, therefore revealing the tripartite system’s inability to accommodate a growing population. Circular 10/65 consequently addressed the concerns of 90 of 163 LEAs who were already beginning the process of comprehensivisation in 1963 according to the Ministry of Education’s estimate (West, 2018).

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Despite the support of most of the public (approximately 80%) and LEAs of comprehensive schools (West, 2016), there were those who opposed, largely on the grounds of supporting the current tripartite system and the benefits of grammar schools.

LOWERING STANDARDS

The belief that teaching students grouped by ability is the most effective way of educating is largely grounded in that it allows teachers to specifically cater to the needs of a particular class when preparing lessons. However, this argument is undermined by the comprehensive school's position to instate sets across the year group, allowing students to be grouped by ability within a larger school (Coe et al; 2008).

Coe et al. (2008) also highlights the 'problematic' nature of comparing the academic results of Secondary Modern, Comprehensive, and Grammar Schools with the aim of arguing the case for better academic results in the latter, as statistics are often taken without context or consideration of wider factors such as the selective nature of the students who were accepted into grammar schools.

Concerns were also raised regarding the size of Comprehensive Schools as many felt that a sense of community and discipline may be lost if a school was to become 'too large' (University of Cambridge, 2017) as well as indications that large schools would be incapable of providing sufficient pastoral care (Ministry of Education, 1959). These concerns were acknowledged in the House of Commons by Labour party MP Mr. James Johnson (House of Commons, 1950), who countered this view with the example of exemplary 'big schools' such as Eton and Manchester Grammar School, highlighting a policymaker's view that large schools are not inherently poor due to their size.

THE 11+ EXAM

The criticism of the 11+ exam was another driving factor, as the exam decided what type of secondary school each child would attend at a young age. Several flaws were noted with this system including the psychological repercussions, as those who did not pass the exam were frequently labelled as academic 'failures'. Vernon (1957, p.53) discussed at length the concerns regarding the effects of 'irreversible segregation' which made the exam, to his view, 'psychologically unsound'.

These concerns continue today as a study from 2018 followed UK students in a selective education programme, who consequently experienced 'high levels of anxiety' and a genuine fear that failure of the 11+ exam would make them a 'failure in life' (Skipper, 2018). This research therefore likely reflects the attitude of students who took the 11+ exam, while also underlining the prejudice that rose against those who failed it.

Familial pressures were also prevalent, particularly in working class families, to pass this exam as a survey conducted in Hertfordshire in 1952 that found that 50% of all parents aspired for their children to attend a grammar school, a statistic that certainly didn't reflect the number of students who went on to attend these schools. Therefore, it stands to reason that the public and LEAs were becoming increasingly cognisant of the issues with the 11+ exam (Collinson and Rost, 2022), and increasingly in favour of comprehensivisation.



The Times, 2025



Getty Photo, 2016

PRACTICALITIES

The DES also acknowledged concerns in the Circular regarding the practical elements of moving to the comprehensive model such as staffing concerns and the lack resources that are necessary to build comprehensive schools that are fit to purpose. Doubts concerning teacher shortages and whether they could sustain large comprehensives were responded with assurances that the reorganisation of Secondary education ‘should not affect the numerical demand for teachers significantly’, while conceding that schools may have to deal with ‘staffing strain’ as a result of a rise in population rather than as a result of comprehensivisation, therefore removing the concern from the equation as it is not directly linked with comprehensives, but secondary schools as a whole (Circular 10/65, 1965).

Meanwhile, several existing school buildings were deemed unsuitable or too small to become comprehensive schools, as an ‘intense competition for building material’ (Coryton, 2023, p.63) were in short supply following the Second World War, (Department of Education, 2024) furthering concerns regarding the construction of Orthodox Comprehensive schools that were fit for use.

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COMPROMISE

According to McColloch (2016, p.24), Brian Simon, a British historian of Education and advocate of comprehensivisation, viewed these compromises as a lack of ‘political will’ on the Labour Government’s part, however, others may argue that these concessions were more so a case of well-meaning compromise and a sense of the reality of reform on such a large scale as opposed to a hesitancy in the application of comprehensivisation. McCulloch (2016) also emphasises the importance of Circular 10/65 in the UK education system as it formally marks the major shift from elitism in education to a standard of equal opportunity for all students.

COMPROMISE

This concern regarding buildings was formally addressed by the DES in the Circular, and a compromise of 6 types of schools deemed acceptable under comprehensivisation was reached. These included: the Orthodox Comprehensive School (ages 11–18); a two tier system of Lower Comprehensive (ages 11–13/14) and Senior Comprehensive (ages 13/14–16) with the option to progress to Sixth Form; a two tier system of Lower Comprehensive (ages 11–13/14 or 15) with the option to progress to Senior Comprehensive at age 13/14 to sit GCEs, or to stay on in the Lower Comprehensive until the age of 15; a two tier system of Lower Comprehensive (ages 11–13/14) and the option between two Senior Comprehensives (13–14+), one of which was for those who wish to remain in education only as long as it is compulsory, and another for those who wish to pursue further education; Comprehensive Schools (ages 11–16) followed by a sixth form college; a three tier system of Primary School (ages 4–8/9), Middle School (ages 8/9–12/13) and Comprehensive School (ages 12/13–18) (Circular 10/65, 1965).

Of these types of schools, the third and fourth were permitted on a temporary basis as a hybrid system (Circular 10/65, 1965) that reflected an understanding of the limitations surrounding building new schools. In this way, the policy may be viewed as firm in principle yet flexible in practice as it also allowed Church and Direct Grant Schools the option to implement partial or delayed integration into the system and did not abolish institutions such as Grammar Schools. The way in which the policy was presented as a request providing guidance (rather than being a legislation) (McColloch, 2016) also suggests deference to the expertise of LEAs in the planning of how they would approach comprehensivisation in their area.

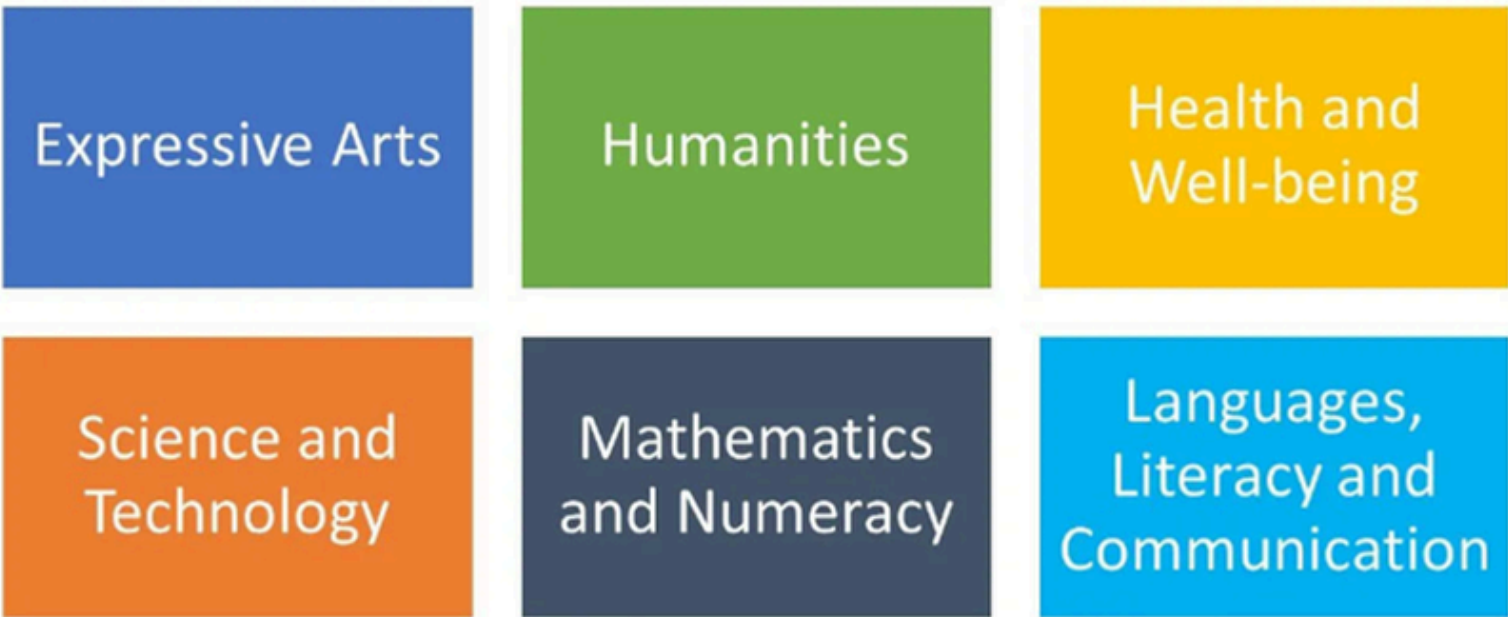
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THE NEW CURRICULUM FOR WALES

Wales’ largest education reform, the new Curriculum for Wales (CfW) was implemented in September 2022 by The Welsh Government (The Welsh Labour Party) and represents Wales’ largest education reform as their first major change in curriculum since the National Curriculum for England and Wales’s inception in 1988. The curriculum is built on a foundation of the ‘four purposes’ of education which include creating learners who are; ambitious and capable of lifelong learning; enterprising and creative; ethical and informed citizens; healthy and confident individuals (Hwb, 2022). The curriculum also saw subjects and key stages replaced by ‘Areas of Learning and Experience’ (AoLEs) and ‘Progression steps’ for ages 3 to 16, thereby providing schools with the autonomy to design their own curriculum within this framework (Power and Taylor, 2020).



Welsh Government, 2019



Flint High School, 2023

CONTEXT

Connolly et al. (2024) outlines the history of post-devolutionary education in Wales in the form of three distinct ‘waves of policy’, beginning in 1999 when experimentation regarding policies were the approach, to an emphasis placed on accountability following poor PISA results in 2009, and finally a step into an ‘ambitious reform journey’ (p.23), of which the CfW is the ‘reform centrepiece’ (p.24). Additionally, these poor PISA results highlighted the weaknesses of the current system, therefore directly influencing the desire for a ‘future-oriented curricula’, that aims to deliver a high quality of education on a national basis (OECD, 2020, p.3).

A growing desire was recorded for a distinct Welsh identity to be reflected in Wales’ education system, an opportunity for a display of ‘Welsh people deciding what is taught in Welsh schools’ according to Kirsty Williams (former Education Minister) (Roberts, 2023). This was in addition to a greater emphasis on the implementation of Welsh language provision as is implied by the existence of the Cymraeg 2050 strategy, a national effort to increase the number of Welsh speakers in the country (Welsh Government, 2017). This suggests that one of the key goals of the Welsh Government currently is to provide a curriculum that reflects Welsh culture, values and priorities.

TEACHER AGENCY

Connolly et al. (2024) highlighted the opportunity that teacher-led curricula could allow teachers greater agency, allowing for their re-professionalisation, while working within a national framework to ensure consistency and that the four purposes are met. The CfW also allows for flexibility regarding the needs, culture and languages of specific local area (Duggan et al; 2025). This view is supported by OCEA’s (2020, p.3) depiction of the CfW as ‘grounded in a renewed confidence in educators’ professionalism’, underlining the key role that teachers would play in the design of curriculum, drawing on their experience and expertise.

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SKILLS-BASED CURRICULUM

Additionally, Donaldson (2015) produced a report that made several recommendations regarding future Welsh Curriculums including the concerns of employers who argue that pupils need stronger ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills in STEM subjects and collaboration to prepare them for the workplace and employment. As a result, the CfW was designed to meet these needs via a ‘curricular framework based on broad competencies’ with an emphasis on skills-based learning, emphasising the development of skills and their application over the knowledge-based national curriculum (OECD, 2020, p.35).



Glamorgan Star, 2022



Redsnapper/Alamy, 2024



Highdown School and Sixth Form Center, 2026

ASSESSMENT

The 2015 independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales highlighted how the National Curriculum had become ‘overloaded, complicated... and outdated’. The result of this review translated into the four purposes which provide a clear national vision concerning the purpose and aims of education according to Crick and Knight (2021). The move from Key Stages to Progressions Steps was also supported by the OECD, Curriculum researchers and The Camau Project as it recognises that learning is not straightforward or always linear but rather continuous, and therefore the way that learners’ progress is tracked should reflect this understanding (OECD 2020). The curriculum’s intention to view assessment as a step to support learners rather than to pass judgement on them is also identified in a period when assessment formats such as exams have been brought into question by educators and psychologists alike (Black and William, 1998).

WELSH IDENTITY

A report conducted by The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee (National Assembly for Wales, 2019) emphasised the importance of supporting Welsh identity through the CfW with a particular emphasis on teaching Welsh history and its relevance on an international and local level. This highlights the way in which historians, cultural organisations and Welsh language advocates supported the creation of the CfW as Wales was provided with the opportunity to create a Curriculum that centres on its own national identity.

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Istock/Getty Photo, 2016

SKILLS OVER ACADEMICS

Concerns regarding the cost of a ‘student-centred curricular’ has also risen, as well as the risks of inconsistency in the quality of education across schools if there is a lack of external oversight over curriculum design in addition to further financial investment in the education system and schools, as raised by educational sociologists Power, Newton and Taylor (2020). An emphasis was also placed on how an overt focus on ‘relevant’ and applicable skills may threaten the teaching of certain academic subjects, narrowing student’s options of disciplines to pursue in the future as they do not fall under vocational or ‘practical’ areas.

LACK OF GUIDANCE

However, critics and teachers raised concerns that the framework was too vague and lacked specific guidelines for teachers to follow as the balance between ensuring consistency in the quality of education and teacher autonomy was deemed unclear (Evans, 2023). Evans (2023) also highlighted that researchers may question the ‘lack of guidance and inconsistency in messaging’ in the framework which resulted in cases of self-doubt in teachers’ abilities. This resulted in a recommendation to utilise educative materials to help navigate the CfW while cautious of the possibility that overspecification may limit teacher agency. A study conducted by Cole-Jones et al. (2022) suggests that anxiety from some senior teachers is prevalent concerning whether their teaching style and expertise is in line with the new curriculum.

The matter of assessment arrangements is another frequently debated matter as many deem them unclear in the sense that skills cannot be assessed in the same way as a knowledge-based curricula, making it difficult without proper guidance to accomplish, especially when considering inequalities between schools as some will excel while other struggle with these elements of the CfW according to Sibieta (2024).

TEACHER WORKLOAD

And while teacher agency has been celebrated in the CfW, the additional workload that curriculum design would place upon teachers would require time and training that already qualified teachers may lack. Qualitative data collected by Cole-Jones et al. (2022) suggested that both the cost of the time teachers required to design their curriculum and time restraints due to the Covid-19 lockdown affected how prepared they are for the implementation of the CfW. The survey also found that two out of every 3 teacher that responded felt that their school needed ‘additional support’ in the form of additional training on curriculum design to be prepared.

The importance of The CfW cannot be understated as the retreat from test-driven education and the move towards a purpose-driven curriculum makes Wales the object of much debate across the UK, as it actively raises questions regarding the role of teachers and national identity in schooling (Davies, 2025).

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PHASED IMPLEMENTATION

To accommodate concerns regarding the time needed to adapt to the CfW, the curriculum was introduced in phases, as a phased implementation and the flexibility it affords allowed schools time to prepare. This phased implementation was set out by the Welsh Government in several steps, the first being the document ‘Education in Wales: Our national mission’ (which sets out the key policies and their implementation plan up until 2022. This was followed by the publication of ‘Curriculum for Wales: The journey to 2022’ (Welsh Government, 2020), which outlined the expectations for curriculums (OECD, 2020). In September 2022 the CfW officially began in ‘all primary and some secondary schools’ and is to be ‘phased in gradually’ until 2026 at which point it will be fully implemented (Evans, 2023, p.2).

Additionally, in response to the concerns about qualifications which are tied to assessment, the Welsh Parliament (Dauncey, 2024) collaborated with Qualifications Wales in 2019 to align GCSE reform with the curriculum, ensuring that qualifications aligned with the new curriculum and did not undermine the CfW’s aims.

COMPROMISES

According to the OECD (2020, p.48), in response to fears regarding the readiness of schools, the Welsh Government would be ‘investing unprecedented amounts of resources’ as well as a revised Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) and Digital Competence Framework (DCF) to provide teachers with greater guidance to support teachers as they plan their curriculum (Welsh Government, 2024).

Further training that was reformed and offered to teachers included the National Professional Learning Entitlement (Hwb, 2025), the Curriculum for Wales Professional Learning Grant, a reform of Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and the Welsh Government’s Curriculum for Wales Grant Support Programme. The first of which is a national commitment that gives all teaching staff access to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and training while in their profession (Hwb, 2025) and has received further funding to support teachers during the transition to the CfW. However, may it be noted that according to a survey conducted by UNISON (2023), 66% of teaching assistants felt that the training they had received was insufficient, and no such data is available on how many qualified teachers have received such training. Estyn’s (2025) report ‘Teaching the Curriculum for Wales’ also highlighted teacher’s uncertainty and lack of confidence in assessment, progression and designing their curriculum.



Architype, 2026

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