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Mijnheer de Minister,

Following an extensive preparatory phase, teachers, school heads and schools in the Netherlands are currently engaged in a redesign of national curriculum framework as part of the *Curriculum.nu* project, aimed at identifying what knowledge and skills pupils in Dutch primary and secondary schools need to possess. During this development phase of this redesign, they are working in teams to develop building blocks for nine areas of learning. These development teams have been tasked with determining what should be at the heart of the curriculum: the vision of the areas of learning, the core mission in each area, and the knowledge and skills that pupils need to achieve it (the 'building blocks'). The development phase will run until the spring of 2019, after which the results will be presented. Following the political decision-making process, the attainment targets will be updated on the basis of the building blocks.[1] The precise details of this exercise have yet to be determined.

Request for advice: How can curriculum innovation contribute to educational quality?
The Dutch Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and Media asked the Education Council to advise on the process of curriculum innovation. In formulating its advice, the Council examined how curriculum innovation can play a meaningful role in the quality of education. With this in mind, the Council focused on the following question: How can curriculum innovation be organised in such a way that it makes a lasting contribution to educational quality?[2]

Education prepares pupils for the future, equipping them to function in the personal, social and occupational realms. To be able to do this, now and in the future, it is important that education is up to date and consistently focused on quality improvement. Subject and subject area content is developing continually, and society and the labour market are also subject to constant change, and it is therefore vital that the curriculum keeps up with developments in society. This requires some steering from government to ensure cohesion between subjects and subject areas within and between educational sectors; this avoids curriculum innovation being an ad hoc or fragmented process. Government steering also reduces the risk of an imbalanced and overloaded system with insufficient cohesion and interconnectedness between subject areas.[3] Whilst curriculum innovation is necessary, therefore, it is important that it takes place in the right way. That is the starting point taken by the Council in this advice, following on from its 2014 report 'A curriculum for today' (*Een eigentijds curriculum*).[4]

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[1] Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2018), *Start ontwikkelfase curriculumherziening primair en voortgezet onderwijs*, Letter to Parliament, 23 February 2018.
[2] The Council adopts a broad interpretation of educational quality: education should always contribute to the qualification, socialisation and personal development of pupils; these are three inseparable domains for which schools have an explicit responsibility. See Onderwijsraad (2016), *De volle breedte van onderwijskwaliteit.*
[3] Onderwijsraad (2014), *Een eigentijds curriculum.*
[4] Ibid.

Curriculum innovation is a topic that can be viewed from several perspectives.[5] The government's task in relation to the current redesign of national curriculum framework (the *Curriculum.nu* project) has been formulated from the perspective of content (what do pupils learn?). To answer the request for advice, the Education Council will adopt a technical/professional perspective (how can the process of curriculum innovation be optimised?) and a socio-political perspective (how does the decision-making process take place and who decides on what?). In other words, the Council focuses on the processes which play a role in curriculum innovation, and views the current redesign in that light.[6]

In section 1 the Council notes that the term 'curriculum' is used in a variety of different ways and examines the different processes involved in curriculum innovation. Section 2 puts forward recommendations to achieve a continual process of curriculum innovation aimed at ensuring that it is able to make an effective contribution to educational quality now and in the future.

1   Draw a clear distinction between the different processes of curriculum innovation

The Council notes that the term 'curriculum' is used in the present redesign of national curriculum framework to describe different elements at different levels of the Dutch education system. At national level, the term is used to refer to the updating of attainment targets ('updating the curriculum'), but it is also used to describe education in the classroom ('an updated curriculum in the classroom'). Other references used are 'a practicable core curriculum' and 'the individual school curriculum'.[7]

The present redesign of national curriculum framework brings together several different but related activities, which are associated with the aforementioned elements in different ways. The development teams in the *Curriculum.nu* project are charged with determining what should be at the heart of the curriculum: the vision for the areas of learning, the core mission in each area, and the knowledge and skills needed by pupils to achieve it. The development teams formulate a vision for each area of learning ('the general principles of and contribution by the area of learning to the main educational goals'). Starting from this vision, a core mission is formulated ('the fundamental insights of the subject or area of learning, the core concepts and principles that lie at its heart'). The core concepts are given tangible form as building blocks ('a description of the knowledge and skills that are important for all pupils in the different phases of primary and secondary education'). The building blocks are worked up into sample lessons at development schools. Following the political decision-making, the intention is to update the attainment targets on the basis of these building blocks.[8]

In the following text, the Council seeks to bring clarity to the terminology and the different processes it believes are part and parcel of curriculum innovation.

Three distinct processes play a role
In the Council's view, curriculum innovation consists of three different processes: 1) updating attainment targets; 2) curriculum development; and 3) school improvement. Figure 1 illustrates these processes (and the level within the education system at which they should take place). The arrows in the figure show the input that is needed for
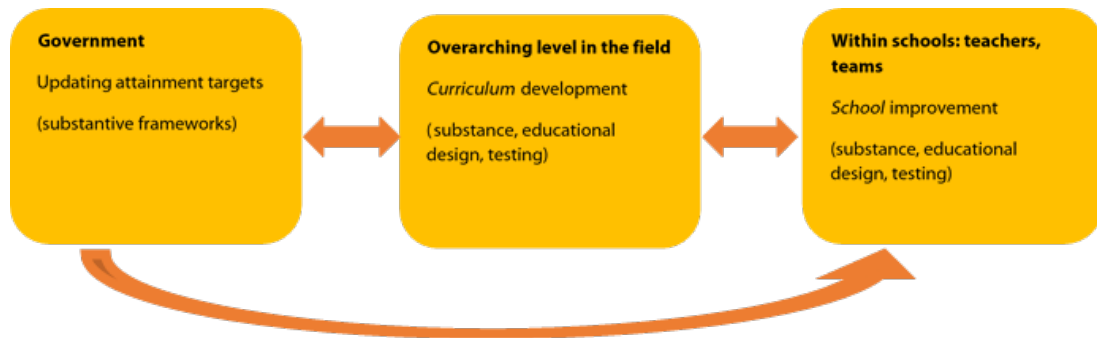
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[5] Van den Akker, J. & Thijs, A. (2009), *Leerplan in ontwikkeling*.
[6] The Education Council has expressed a view on content elsewhere, for example in its reports on citizenship (2012), cultural education (2012), internationalisation (2016), digitalisation (2017) and sport and exercise (2018).
[7] Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2018.
[8] Ibid.

updating and development. The figure does not illustrate phases (the processes run simultaneously and in interaction with each other) or hierarchy (in the sense of degrees of importance). The different processes are discussed in more detail below.

Figure 1. Illustration of the processes within curriculum innovation

Updating attainment targets

As the body responsible for the quality of the education system at national level, the government formulates the substantive frameworks, in the form of attainment targets which establish in law what the goals and content of education are.[9] This is described for each subject, subject cluster or area of learning. Attainment targets have been formulated for primary education, special education (secondary and primary) and the first years of secondary education. These targets date from 2006, and have been only partially updated since then, for example adding the canon of Dutch history as a starting point in the attainment targets for history in 2009, to illustrate the treatment of time periods. The prescriptive frameworks for the upper years of secondary school comprise subject-specific examination programmes[10] made up of attainment targets, which describe the examination syllabus for each subject.[11] Attainment targets are set by the government and need to be updated from time to time.

Curriculum development

When goals (substantive frameworks) are linked to educational design and testing – making content 'teachable' and 'studiable' – the result is a curriculum. Curriculum development takes place 'in the field' at the overarching level, and is shaped by goals that are partly external (attainment targets) and partly derived from the subject or subject area itself (such as content innovation and development of insights). By 'in the field' the Council is referring inter alia to teachers in professional associations and other 'organised' bodies, curriculum development organisations, test experts,[12] academics and educational publishers. These parties each bring their own expertise to bear on curriculum development and also take into account overarching trends which go beyond individual schools, such as the emergence of a digital culture in education.[13] Using the term 'curriculum development' could suggest a single process, whereas in reality it consists of several different constituent processes and relates to different constituent curricula, such as the curriculum for citizenship education or arithmetic/mathematics.

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[9] Additional reference levels for language and mathematics have applied since August 2010 for primary education, special education, secondary education and senior secondary vocational education. These stipulate the level of knowledge and competence that pupils must possess in Dutch language and arithmetic/mathematics. SLO (2018), *Over kerndoelen en eindtermen*.

[10] SLO, 2018.

[11] See e.g. Examenprogramma Engelse taal vmbo vanaf CE 2017, available (in Dutch) at
https://www.examenblad.nl/onderwerp/examenprogramma-s/2019.

[12] It is important that issues relating to testing are included in curriculum development from the start. See Education Council (2018), *Toets wijzer*.

[13] Onderwijsraad (2017), *Doordacht digitaal.*

Curriculum development can even vary within individual subjects and subject areas; for example, the subject 'Dutch' develops differently in the upper years of secondary education from the lower years, and is different again in primary education: not all developments in all subjects and subject areas run in tandem.

School improvement
But education is about more than curriculum development and updating attainment targets. A third process is needed, namely school improvement. Teachers design and shape their teaching specifically for their pupils at their own school. They base this on the attainment targets and draw on the curriculum that has been developed at overarching level (teaching methods, insights presented in handouts, etc.). The educational philosophy of the school is an important element here; schools design their teaching from the perspective of a particular philosophy or particular pedagogical or didactic principles,[14] and tailor the educational programmes they develop to their pupils and the local situation. Among other things, schools determine how pupils are tested (see e.g. developments in relation to formative assessment and school examinations),[15] which subjects or subject areas are emphasised and which didactic methods are used. Some schools prioritise citizenship education, religious education and identity development of pupils, for example, while others focus more on philosophy, ethics and classical literature. Other examples include working in digital learning settings, interdisciplinary teaching on themes such as internationalisation, research and design or use of direct instruction.

Positive assessment of Curriculum.nu project, but also some concerns
The Education Council endorses the fact that different stakeholder groups at overarching level are thinking about the mission of education and the role of the different subjects and subject areas. The Council takes a positive view of the way in which this aspect has been given a place within the present redesign of national curriculum framework (and the process leading up to it). The Council believes it is important that the diversity of opinions and ideas about the content of the curriculum should be visible.[16] This joint approach has been given tangible form in the instructions to Platform Onderwijs2032 ('Education 2032 Platform') of conducting a public dialogue on the content of primary and secondary education.[17] The *Curriculum.nu* project also incorporates an exchange of ideas on the vision, core mission and building blocks. This manifests itself among other things in the direct involvement of teachers and school heads in the development teams and the contribution made by development schools in putting the results produced by the development teams into practice in a real-life teaching situation and reflecting on them.[18] The shared input on the development of the core mission of subjects/subject areas and building blocks is a useful part of the curriculum development process.

However, the Council also has some concerns. Looking at the above division into processes in relation to the *Curriculum.nu* project, it is apparent that there is currently a lack of segregation between the processes of updating attainment targets, curriculum development and school improvement. *Curriculum.nu* is simultaneously working on developing building blocks as a basis for updating existing attainment targets, on curriculum development (through joint reflection on goals and content) and on school improvement (developing building blocks which are then worked up into sample lessons at development schools). The Council believes that this lack of segregation can be explained partly by the way the redesign of national curriculum framework was initially set up and approached. The former State Secretary for Education fired the starting pistol

[14] Onderwijsraad (2016), *De volle breedte van onderwijskwaliteit.*
[15] Onderwijsraad, 2018.
[16] Onderwijsraad (2014), *Een eigentijds curriculum.*
[17] Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2014), *Toekomstgericht funderend onderwijs,* kamerbrief 17 November 2014.
[18] Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2017a), *Vervolg curriculumherziening in het primair en voortgezet onderwijs*, Letter to Parliament, 10 February 2017; Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2017b), *Vervolgfase van de herziening van het curriculum voor het primair en voortgezet onderwijs,* Letter to Parliament, 7 July 2017; Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2018.

for setting out a course for the primary and secondary education curriculum, with one of the aims being to update the attainment targets. As a first step towards this, Platform Onderwijs2032 proposed among other things that the curriculum should be organised on the basis of areas of learning. The *Curriculum.nu* project then set about addressing a number of substantive questions: What knowledge and skills do pupils in Dutch primary and secondary schools need? What is the core mission of a subject/area of learning? What are the building blocks that make up a subject/area of learning? The Council believes that the lack of segregation between the different processes means the redesign of national curriculum framework currently being carried out has too little focus and direction to be able to achieve all the aims of updating attainment targets, curriculum development and promoting school improvement within schools, and that to ensure satisfactory progress, three distinct and adequately separated processes are needed (see Figure 1).

Viewed from this perspective, in the Council's view it is unlikely that attainment targets can be updated purely on the basis of the building blocks. While the building blocks identify which knowledge and skills pupils need, the attainment targets need to be formulated in a way that also takes into account the tension between government steering and safeguarding school autonomy. This requires a formulation that allows the government to deliver on its ultimate responsibility for educational quality whilst at the same time affording schools a stimulating professional space for educational and curriculum development. Successful development of updated attainment targets requires a different, non-linear process. To achieve this, the Council recommends setting up a standing committee to focus on the updating of attainment targets and on curriculum development. The role and brief of this committee is discussed in more detail in section 2.

2 Standing committee to monitor curriculum development and advise on updating of attainment targets

Preparing pupils adequately for the future requires a coherent curriculum which is in tune with developments in society. Curriculum development is therefore never 'finished', but should be a continuous and dynamic process which interacts with the process of updating attainment targets. Given the many parties involved in curriculum development,[19] and the different pace of developments in different subjects and subject areas, it is also important to have a system of redesign of national curriculum framework at national level that is transparent and measurable. The present redesign does not yet meet these conditions. What will follow the project is unclear, and the review appears to be focused primarily on a one-off updating of attainment targets, with no embedding in a structured system of periodic review and no linkage to a continuous process of curriculum development. As in its earlier report 'A curriculum for today' (*Een eigentijds curriculum*), the Council therefore again calls for the installation of an independent standing committee which can oversee the entire curriculum on a continuous basis.[20]
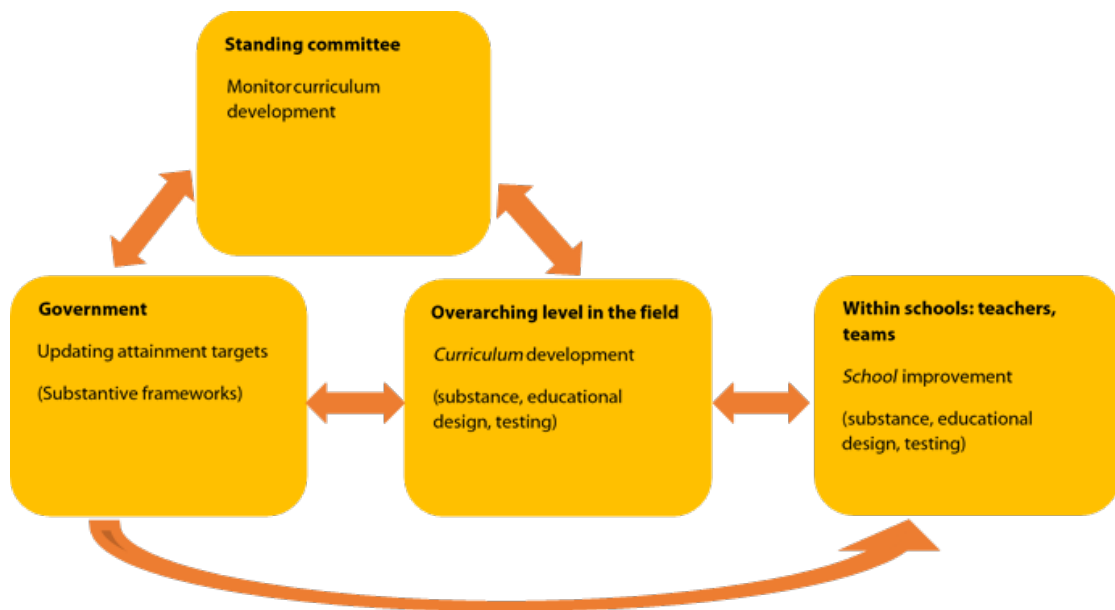
Monitoring and advice by standing committee
The Education Council sees two tasks for such a standing committee: advising on the periodic review of attainment targets, and monitoring curriculum developments and their coherence. This is illustrated in Figure 2. The committee would emphatically not have the task of determining, establishing, assessing or testing the content and design of education at individual schools. The independence of the standing committee should be reflected in the anchoring of its brief in law and by ensuring its systematic autonomy from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the political arena. This would also enable the committee to weigh specific

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[19] Such as professional associations, the National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO), en Board of Tests and Examinations (CvTE).
[20] Onderwijsraad, 2014.

interim (ad hoc) requests for new curriculum content in the context of the curriculum as a whole. This in turn would enable the committee to ensure coherence across the curriculum and to prevent the curriculum becoming overloaded with goals.

Standing committee

Monitor curriculum development

Government

Updating attainment targets

(Substantive frameworks)

Overarching level in the field

Curriculum development

(substance, educational design, testing)

Within schools: teachers, teams

School improvement

(substance, educational design, testing)

Figure 2. Illustration of the role of the standing committee in curriculum innovation

The composition of the standing committee should reflect the broad public interest served by education, and its members should possess a high degree of expertise. Potential members could include authoritative experts in the field of curriculum development, representatives of the different educational sectors and stakeholders from academia and the community.

Experiences with curriculum reforms in other countries have shown that the broad engagement of stakeholders – especially once the first results have become available - and ensuring consistency between the findings of curriculum working groups are crucial success factors.[21] The Council therefore recommends that the standing committee should be installed before any further steps are taken in the present process of redesign of national curriculum framework. The committee's first task could be to examine the next steps in the process of updating attainment targets and then advising the government on its findings. The committee could also incorporate the results of the *Curriculum.nu* project which will be published in the spring of 2019, but for a complete picture must also take a broader view, among other things incorporating input from professional associations, curriculum developers, assessment and examination experts and stakeholders from academia.

Anchor the process of periodic review in law
The government establishes attainment targets and carries ultimate responsibility for them. In setting the targets, it provides the frameworks needed to develop a coherent educational structure. The Council believes that, to

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[21] Van den Akker, J. (2018), *Developing curriculum frameworks: A comparative analysis*.

ensure a meaningful relationship between these frameworks and the continual process of curriculum development, it is important to establish in law that attainment targets must be periodically updated. The law could stipulate that the government takes advice from the standing committee once every so many years on the need to update attainment targets and that the government gives the standing committee the opportunity to issue advice before revising attainment targets. There are similarities here with the procedure for updating the proficiency requirements of teachers; those requirements set broad minimum standards, which are used as milestones in training teachers and maintaining their proficiency. The governing legislation stipulates that the Minister must review once every six years whether the proficiency standards can be maintained or need to be amended.[22] The law also prescribes a procedure whereby a professional teachers' organisation formulates a proposal for proficiency standards and submits this to the Minister for adoption.[23]

Carry out scans to map curriculum developments
To ensure good coordination between subject areas and educational sectors and make it possible to provide sound advice on periodic updating, it is important that the standing committee understands what is happening in educational practice in terms of curriculum development. The Dutch Inspectorate of Education, professional associations and the National Institute for Curriculum Development are among the bodies which currently gather information on what is happening in education, but this mainly information reflects day-to-day practice and developments at school level. There is also no independent body which brings together all available information. The Council therefore recommends that as part of its monitoring mandate, the standing committee should perform scans at regular intervals, for example once every five years.[24] This could help prevent relevant developments being missed or recognised too late, and also reduce the risk that developments will not be seen in context, which can lead to imbalances between subjects or subject areas.

The information produced by the scans can be used in two ways: to enable the government to adjust national frameworks as part of a process of periodic review, and to facilitate further curriculum development by those in the field.

Political monitoring, but also reticence
Curriculum development always has a political dimension. Dutch politicians adopt a reticent stance here, because education providers have the freedom to deliver education as they see fit. Evaluations of earlier major educational reforms, international experiences and theoretical insights on curriculum development moreover show that political influence on the curriculum and the attendant policy should be limited. If curriculum reform becomes too political, curriculum development can fall victim to vested interests, implementation mechanisms, concessions and inconsistent changes. Politically driven, ad hoc measures are often ineffective, go against the notion of continuous interaction between design and use, and constrain the ownership of curriculum development and school improvement. Moreover, political ambiguity on the direction in which the curriculum should develop impedes the effectiveness of curriculum development.[25]

The Education Council believes that Parliament's role in the process of curriculum reform should mainly be one of oversight of the implementation of the agreed policy and its effects in practice. Naturally, Parliament, given its

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[22] Sections 32a of the Dutch Primary Education Act, 32a of the Expertise Centres Act, 36 of the Secondary Education Act and 4.2.3 of the Adult and Vocational Education Act.
[23] Explanatory Memorandum to Decree of 16 March 2017 amending the Decree on proficiency standards for teaching staff and the Decree on proficiency standards for teaching staff in Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba in connection with the updating of the proficiency standards for teachers and lecturers. Bulletin of Acts and Decrees, volume 2017, number 148.
[24] The term 'scan' is also an acronym for 'status of curricula in the Netherlands'.
[25] Van den Akker, 2018.

representative function, should be guided in part by what is happening in educational practice and in Dutch society. The Council also sees scope in this role for Parliament to seek advice from the standing committee on policy in relation to curriculum development or the updating of attainment targets.
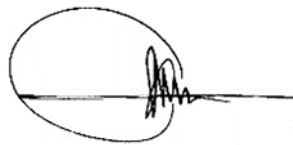
Conclusion

The Education Council has focused here on the different processes involved in curriculum innovation. The Council draws a distinction between the three processes of updating attainment targets, curriculum development and school improvement. In line with the advice in its 2014 report on the curriculum, the Council calls for the creation of a standing committee, which would be tasked on the one hand with advising on the periodic updating of attainment targets and on the other with carrying out periodic monitoring to maintain an overview of curriculum developments in educational practice.

The Council believes the focus areas highlighted here will be helpful in designing the above processes in such a way that curriculum innovation can genuinely contribute to educational quality now and in the future.

Met beleefde groet,

Professor H. Maassen van den Brink
Chairman

C. van 't Veen
Secretary ad interim