

**Subject:**

**Circular Number: 2020/05**

**GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS ON SUPPORTING REMOTE LEARNING TO PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL CONTINUITY**

**Date of Issue:**

5 June 2020

**Target Audience:**

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all nursery, primary, post-primary and special grant-aided schools
- Education Authority (EA)
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)
- Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC)
- Proprietors of Independent Schools
- Governing Bodies Association of Voluntary Grammar Schools in NI (GBANI)
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)
- General Teaching Council for NI (GTCNI)
- Teachers' Unions
- EOTAS Centres
- Middletown Centre for Autism
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS)

**Summary of Contents:**

This circular provides initial advice and guidance to schools on supporting remote learning on the basis of what schools have reported over the first period of remote learning.

**Enquiries:**

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**Governor Awareness:**

Essential

**Status of Contents:**

Guidance for schools

**Expiry Date:**

None

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**DE Website:**

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## **Supporting Remote Learning to Provide Educational Continuity**

### **Introduction**

1. Schools in Northern Ireland have adapted quickly to the initial implications of the Minister of Education's decision to close schools (except to children of key workers and vulnerable children), as a consequence of the coronavirus outbreak in Northern Ireland. Schools have been making provision for remote learning by providing pupils with a range of hardcopy and online learning materials; finding new ways of keeping in contact with pupils and their families and supporting parents as they assist their children with their learning.
2. As we now enter a further month of school closures, and with the likelihood that the 2020/21 academic year will commence with a blended approach of remote and in-class learning, the Department has developed this circular in order to share some initial learning points. This circular is designed to bring together what we are learning about emerging practice during this unprecedented time for our education system. It is not intended to be prescriptive but to support schools as they develop and refine their practice around remote learning and begin to plan for a blended approach in September.
3. In recognition of the challenges of the current context, the Department has established a Continuity of Learning Project, to oversee the production and dissemination of a range of high quality support and guidance for teachers, parents and learners. This project is being co-ordinated by the Education Authority, working in collaboration with a wide range of other education support organisations and drawing on input from school leaders and teachers. The Continuity of Learning Project provides an opportunity for practitioners, school leaders and education support organisations to work together, to support our children and young people and to sustain learning for everyone, through these challenging times. Further information can be accessed on the Education Authority website (<https://www.eani.org.uk/supporting-learning>).
4. The immediate next step is to provide opportunities for schools to learn from each other's emerging practice. In the coming weeks, the Project will publish a number of case studies which schools have shared with Link Officers.

5. The nature of provision will vary across schools who need the flexibility to plan and provide remote learning that is suitable for their particular circumstances. This includes considering the age and learning needs of pupils, as well as the content of particular subjects or areas of learning. Remote learning for younger pupils and those who may have additional learning needs will typically need more involvement from parents, whilst some older pupils may be able to learn more independently.
6. The Department is conscious that all pupils do not have the same levels of home support nor do all households have the same level of access to resources, particularly internet connection and devices such as tablets and laptops. Many schools have already lent digital equipment to pupils for use at home. The Education Authority is now engaging with schools to lend digital devices to pupils from socio-economically deprived backgrounds first from existing school resources and subsequently to provide new devices.

### **Principles of Remote Learning**

7. The Department is very conscious that schools had extremely limited time to prepare for the delivery of remote learning prior to school closures. The pressures faced by teachers and classroom assistants, who may be continuing to work in schools supervising pupils, or working from home dealing with competing priorities such as looking after children, must be recognised. Consequently whilst this section sets out high-level principles that schools may wish to consider when further developing their remote learning programmes and as they plan for a blended approach to learning, the Department intends this guidance to provide support and assistance only.
8. One key learning point that has emerged worldwide during the current school closures is that schools should not expect to make similar progress to taught lessons in any given period of remote learning. It will be necessary to identify key learning priorities, without necessarily sacrificing breadth across the curriculum. Schools will wish to take a pragmatic approach to delivering the curriculum, prioritising key knowledge, understanding and skills in each area of learning.
9. Given the extended period of school closures and in preparing for a blended approach to learning, the Department would recommend that all schools aim to engage with pupils on an ongoing basis through the wide range of elearning platforms available rather than provide hard copy or emailed resources alone, if at all possible.

10. Technology can potentially increase both the quality and quantity of remote learning that pupils undertake. The use of e-learning platforms can provide additional opportunities to motivate pupils, establish a daily routine and give ongoing feedback, helping to keep pupils engaged and enhancing their learning experience. Notably, OECD has stressed that the success of all pupils during this period and particularly those from disadvantaged groups is linked to maintaining a close relationship with their teachers.
  
11. The Department has not prescribed elearning tools to be used by schools, as this will vary according to the pupil profile and the individual subject and task context. The C2K system, however, provides a secure platform and a range of tools to support teaching and learning.
  
12. In further developing their remote learning experiences and as they move to a blended learning approach, schools will be reflecting on their pedagogical goals and how technology might help to achieve these goals. In this work, schools may wish to give consideration to the key principles set out below.
  - i. Learning tasks and activities should be designed to achieve a specific goal or for a specific reason in order to engage pupils. Providing explicit learning objectives and clear success criteria for activities is important and ensures pupils are clear on the purpose and intended outcomes of the learning experience. Having pupils themselves set individual or class goals for working remotely can also increase motivation and engagement. The Education Endowment Foundation has developed a range of planning and reflection tools which schools and teachers may find useful when developing their remote learning practice (<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/support-resources-for-schools/>). The planning framework sets out a learning sequence with five approaches to learning – activate, explain, practise, reflect and review – and provides example tasks and activities within each approach.
  
  - ii. Optimally elearning learning tasks should last around 10-30 minutes for primary pupils and 30-45 minutes for post-primary pupils.
  
  - iii. Schools should aim to utilise the multimedia aspects of e-learning through visuals, video and audio where possible. Providing links to videos, online experiments,

animations and podcasts can be very helpful by providing pupils with different ways of explaining concepts, assisting those who are less confident, and to work in lieu of teacher-led explanation.

- iv. It is important as much as possible to adjust existing practice and resources to ensure they are still engaging for pupils working remotely. For example, providing pupils with handouts that would have been used in the classroom can be confusing without the teaching to accompany it, particularly if there are large amounts of text which has to be inserted. Schools will wish to consider adapting these to ensure they stand alone to provide simple and clear explanations of work.
- v. Schools and teachers recognise a focus on feedback is key. E-learning tools provide opportunities to give regular whole class and individual feedback to pupils whilst they are learning remotely (see Assessment and Feedback Section).
- vi. Where possible schools should aim to ensure the resources provided are appropriately differentiated by pupils' ability in order to provide a positive learning experience for all pupils and avoid feelings of frustration and confusion.
- vii. When providing worksheet or packs of hard copy resources, it is helpful to send guidance on completion of the activities, model explanations and answers as much as possible in order to assist parents in supporting their child's learning. Worksheet style resources without explanations and answers will be a particular issue for pupils in more vulnerable circumstances. In addition, if schools are emailing worksheet style resources, it is essential to have hard copies available at school or to be delivered or posted, as not all parents will have access to printing facilities and ink cartridges are expensive. Almost a quarter of respondents to a recent report by Stranmillis University College on Home-Schooling in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 crisis did not have a printer. If possible, schools should actively encourage parents to get copies of resources from school or for them to be delivered or posted.
- viii. Online learning can include:
  - asynchronous approaches, which occur more independently at different points in time, based on the child or young person's request or home circumstances; and/or

- synchronous approaches that occur with a number of other children or young people at the same time, usually online.

Asynchronous approaches provide greater flexibility and are easier for parents to manage at home. Therefore, these will remain prevalent when organising distance learning.

Schools may, however, wish to consider implementing some live lessons via a C2K supported digital platform. Scheduling one lesson a day or even one or two lessons a week at a regular time can be valuable and help to develop something of a routine for pupils. It also keeps a level of personal interaction and belonging to the school community, as well as allowing pupils direct access to high quality teaching. Schools will note that when Stranmillis University College asked parents for a single recommendation to improve home-schooling, the most common theme was a call for some degree of live interaction with teachers. This recommendation was echoed in the findings of Parentkind both in Northern Ireland and across the UK.

The Department notes that there is no compelling evidence to indicate that such synchronous learning is more effective at improving pupil outcomes than asynchronous approaches through for example pre-recorded lessons. The Department is also conscious of the cautionary note raised by a number of the teaching unions in regard to livestreaming of lessons. It is of course a matter for individual schools in conjunction with their staff to determine whether livestreaming represents an appropriate learning approach for their school community and to ensure that all child protection and safeguarding procedures are appropriately followed.

Given that not all pupils may be able to access such sessions, it is likely they will focus more on deepening and enriching pupils' existing knowledge and understanding rather than covering new curricular content. Research indicates that online teaching must use about one third of the words that would otherwise be used in normal classrooms in order to hold attention.

- ix. A particularly important aspect of remote and blended learning are the opportunities it offers to focus on pupil independence as learners. This will support the further development of the cross-curricular thinking skills and personal capabilities, particularly self-management and management of information. This may include

helping pupils to organise their learning and to reflect on what conditions and what types of resource are most conducive for helping them as learners. Providing self-assessment and peer-assessment opportunities is a key element of remote learning allowing pupils to reflect on their learning and performance and set goals.

- x. Multiple reviews have highlighted the importance of peer interaction during remote learning. If possible schools should try to provide pupils with the opportunity to collaborate in discussions and group assignments and share their learning with their peers in small groups and online forums. Creating small groups or pairs who share thoughts, carry out peer marking and give feedback on each other's work can be very beneficial. This will help maintain a social connection, help pupils avoid feelings of isolation and encourage pupils to continue working with others as they learn.
- xi. Flipped learning is a pedagogical approach where pupils first explore new course content before class by viewing a pre-recorded lecture, video or digital module, or completing a reading or preparatory assignment. In-class time is organised around pupil engagement, inquiry, and assessment. It typically entails the use of active learning strategies, including case studies, investigating problems or structured discussion. In the current context of remote learning, the concept of flipped learning is important as all aspects of the course are online and pupils will need to explore new content independently. In this context, it is important to note that schools can currently maintain the 'flipped' portion of learning through live class sessions or setting activities for pupils to engage in remote collaboration such as posing questions for pair or small group discussion, or setting shared assignments. Flipped learning will remain important as schools develop their approaches to blended learning.
- xii. Feedback from schools has emphasised the importance of being open and honest with pupils that it is a learning period for all and that their school will want to gather feedback from them on what is going well, what could be better and what they would recommend.
- xiii. Remote learning provides opportunities for collaborative and clustering arrangements between and within schools to explore co-planning and co-teaching, for example to provide thematic experiences which offer learning across the curriculum. In some post primary schools for example, subject departments are dividing the planning and resourcing work between them, with a different teacher

perhaps taking the lead for different year groups. This can maximise teachers' time and avoid duplication of effort.

### **Engagement, Feedback and Assessment**

13. Schools will be considering what monitoring and assessment of pupil progress is feasible during this period of remote learning. Schools should be reassured that the Department has suspended the requirement to carry out statutory assessments and also introduced temporary modifications to provide schools with a high level of discretion to decide what should be included in school reports (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-assessment-and-school-reports> ).
14. As teaching unions have highlighted schools' normal assessment policies have been developed in circumstances when pupils are on site regularly. It is highly unlikely these will be able to be applied unamended to learning that takes place remotely. Rather the main focus of assessment activity during the current period of entirely remote learning should be on levels of engagement and well-being and formative assessment for learning.
15. The first and most basic level of pupil engagement is work completion. The initial challenge is motivating some pupils to complete activities. Research shows that engagement will be higher when goals and expectations are very clear. It is helpful to communicate to pupils the resources available to them on the topic or activity and staff availability for support. It can also help to gain insight into the barriers to work completion so that pupils can be supported appropriately. It can be helpful to showcase exemplars of pupils' work to increase pupil motivation and confidence.
16. Some schools have put in place school-wide approaches to monitor work completion across the curriculum. This can be helpful to provide an overall picture of a pupil's engagement. **If schools detect a lack of engagement, it is vital to make contact as soon as possible with the parent or guardian by email or telephone.** This best practice is happening in many of our schools. Schools will develop their own procedures for determining which staff are best placed to contact parents (class teacher, form teacher, head of year or key stage, vice principal).
17. For older pupils, schools may also consider it appropriate to contact the pupil directly through online learning fora being used by the school such as google classroom or by

email via the C2K network. Staff who become aware of any child protection concerns should continue to follow their school's established safeguarding procedures.

18. Our pupils are facing many challenges when learning remotely, such as distractions when studying online and less regular interaction with teachers and other pupils. Online learning also requires pupils to be self-motivated and have strong time management skills. Consequently, the importance of regular feedback to pupils cannot be overestimated. Many schools are finding creative ways to provide their pupils with feedback while they are learning remotely.

19. As schools and teachers know, numerous studies indicate that feedback is most effective when it is given immediately, rather than a few days, weeks, or months down the line. Giving regular feedback when working remotely can:

- keep pupils motivated and enthusiastic about their learning;
- give pupils a sense that work is being looked at, so they keep sharing it;
- keep channels of communication open so pupils and their families feel part of the school community; and
- enhance pupil learning allowing schools to provide the best possible education in the circumstances.

20. In the remote and blended learning environment, with the absence or reduction of the usual face to face interaction between teachers and pupils, the importance of being as specific as possible when providing feedback cannot be overestimated. Supplying learners with specific information on what exactly they did well, and what may help develop the work further is vital. If the work is good teachers should aim to explain why it is good and if it needs improvement to explain exactly what the pupil needs do to improve, with examples or prompts wherever possible.

21. Formative assessment plays a key role in remote learning. It is important that teachers find ways to see what pupils are learning. Many teachers are building formative assessment into their teaching approach through a mixture of quizzes, polls, self-assessments, or asking pupils to film or record themselves explaining a concept or idea. These will help teachers understand how pupils are achieving during remote learning. Hinge-point questions (perhaps in the form of an online survey) that check whether the class is ready to move on are a helpful tool to check current understanding when working online.

## **Some Ideas for Providing Feedback When Remote Learning**

### **1. Feedback emails**

This can be done in a number of different ways but is an opportunity to provide pupils with individualized and specific support and feedback. For younger children, parents might email photos of completed work to a designated year group or class email address

### **2. Comments on photos of pupils' work or on inter-active activities**

Parents or the pupil upload photos of their child's home learning for example on Twitter or the SeeSaw App, and teachers respond as soon as they can. This feedback can be learning-focused or more general praise and celebration of achievement.

### **3. Showcasing pupils' work in a daily video message**

This can be done in a number of different ways. Teachers post written whole-class motivational feedback on the previous day or week's work. They can also show examples of good home learning, for example giving children "shout-outs" to praise their work. This also helps to maintain a sense of class community, reminding the children of their classmates' names and faces. It is important for schools to have a clear policy for the use of social media platforms.

### **4. Online quizzes to give auto-feedback on incorrect answers**

There are a number of free quizzing platforms, such as Quizlet and Kahoot that also provide data on pupil responses. This type of low stakes testing provides pupils with opportunities to actively process the information being presented, supports retrieval practice, and can help pupils absorb and remember key information. Auto-feedback can be used to focus on common misconceptions. You set up the quiz to give feedback when a pupil selects an incorrect answer, either to explain the right answer or to prompt the pupil to work out the right answer.

### **5. Virtual certificates of achievement for pupils who have shown progress each week**

These can provide a motivational tool for pupils and incentivise others to do the same. Younger children can be awarded a virtual star of the week certificate. Schools might wish to incentivise participation in for example an optional additional writing activity.