

Subject:**Curriculum Delivery 2021/22 Academic Year - Practical Work in Post-Primary Schools****Circular Number: 2021/22****Date of Issue:**

9 September 2021

Target Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all 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 advice and guidance to schools on planning for the delivery of practical work in post-primary schools.

Enquiries:

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Governor Awareness:

Essential

Status of Contents:

Guidance for schools

Expiry Date:

None

This circular provides advice and guidance to schools on practical work in post-primary schools.

DE Website:

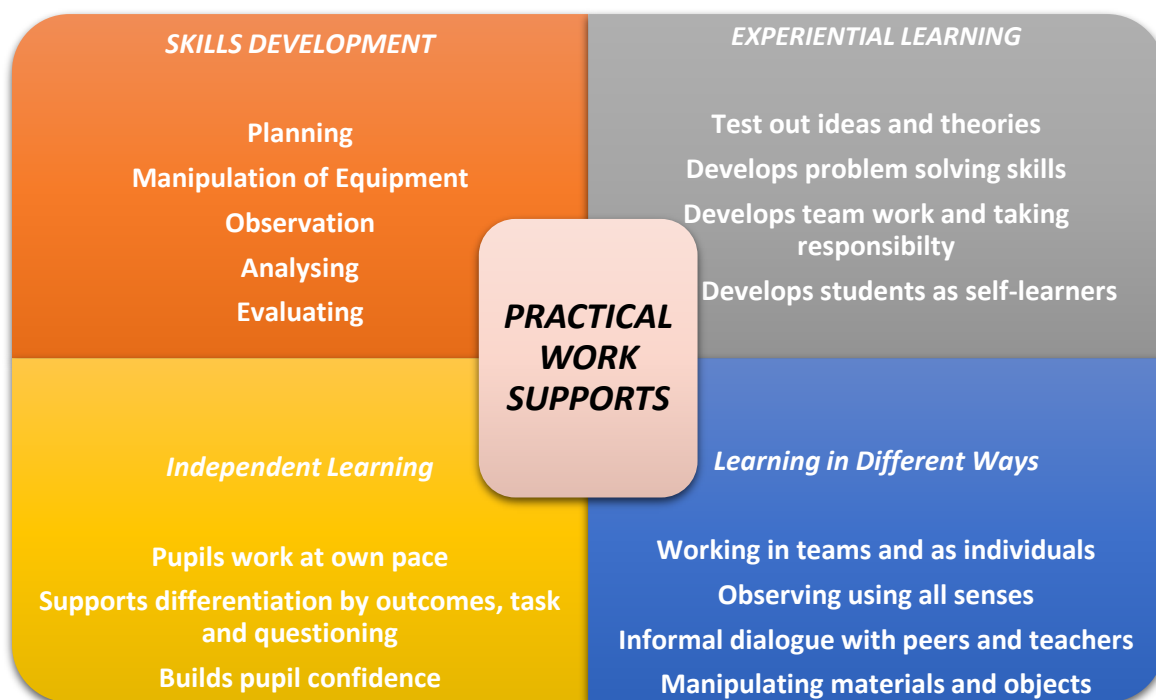
<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/>

Curriculum Planning – Practical Work in Schools 2021/22

Introduction

1. This circular aims to provide advice and assistance to post primary schools, as they deliver practical work within the curriculum during the 2021/22 academic year. **Its contents supersede DE Circular 2021/14 from May 2021.**
2. In addition to this circular, the Department has separately published guidance around the overarching practical and logistical arrangements for schools and education settings ([Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)).
3. We know there have been challenges to the resumption and delivery of practical work. The Department is very conscious that schools are dealing with a wide range of difficult and challenging issues, in particular again adopting routines and protocols that take account of COVID-19 guidance.
4. Schools know, however, the importance of practical work in providing opportunities for experiential learning, increasing independence and group work, as well as development of the skills which are core to many subjects. Equally important is the motivational and engagement effect of practical work for young people. Practical subjects are critical learning opportunities for pupils as they reconnect and adapt to their return to school.
5. **In 2021/22, the Department would, therefore, expect the immediate resumption of practical activities across the curriculum for all post-primary pupils.** We know that many schools already resumed practical activities during the summer term and this guidance is designed to support all schools to do so.

Figure 1: How Practical Work Supports Learning



6. The situation in regard to COVID-19 is changing regularly. COVID-19 Link Officers are available to provide help and support to schools, including around the delivery of practical work. Further guidance will also be provided and updated as the context changes.

Practical Work and Specialist Accommodation

7. As schools know, effective delivery of practical work requires access to specialist equipment and accommodation to continue to develop essential skills across all Areas of Learning.
8. In practice, this is likely to mean that in subjects without practical content teachers may continue to move between classes, but where practical content requires it, schools should plan for all year groups to have regular access to specialist accommodation.
9. Passing briefly in the corridor or playground is low risk and is not considered close contact. **It is no longer appropriate for post primary pupils to receive teaching and learning in a single base classroom with limited access to specialist accommodation.**

Class Groupings for Practical Subjects

10. Although the use of formal bubbles is no longer required in schools, the need for schools to continue to support effective contact tracing means that schools are asked to maintain a cautious and measured approach that still seeks to maximise the time where pupils are within a consistent group of pupils.
11. At post-primary school, the nature of curricular delivery clearly makes it more difficult to implement a single consistent class group. It may be possible, however, in some schools to continue to achieve this for Years 8-10 and this is the preferred option wherever possible to reduce contacts. Schools are encouraged to consider whether they can configure classes to maintain the same class grouping in Years 8-10 for all subjects, **including practical subjects**.
12. Schools with larger class sizes will, however, require mixing into smaller class groups to adhere to legal requirements for practical subjects and in order to provide access to specialist accommodation.
13. Schools are also likely to wish to bring pupils together for Physical Education (PE) or games. The lower levels of risk associated with activities taking place outdoors means that if a school wishes to retain the use or partial use of bubbles indoors, it may not be necessary to do so outdoors.

Social Distancing

14. Social distancing should be encouraged but is not a requirement and should not be a barrier to the delivery of practical subjects. **It is acceptable for children to work in pairs and groups to carry out practical activities**
15. Teachers should aim to maintain a two metre distance when observing pupils as they work through practical activities. This may present an issue if the teacher has concerns about the ability of the pupils to carry out the task safely without direct intervention from the teacher that lasts longer than 15 minutes. If this is the

case then the teacher should consider a different approach to the activity, an alternative activity or doing a demonstration rather than a hands-on practical.

Hygiene Measures

16. Opportunities to wash or sanitise hands thoroughly should be built into all practical activities and teachers' planning. Hand-washing facilities or hand sanitiser stations should be available and easily accessible when entering or leaving a learning space.
17. Pupils and staff should always wash their hands before and after handling equipment for practical activities. Ideally, this should involve soap, water and paper towels, which is the most effective hand washing method. If this is not manageable, then hand gels should be used
18. **Alcohol gels and sprays can be a fire risk in the laboratory, so care should be taken not to expose to any source of ignitions until all fumes have dispersed.**
19. **It is preferable in the laboratory to use non-alcohol gels which claim to kill 99.99% of viruses and bacteria (this is a regulated term in the UK, meaning the product has passed a BSI test).**
20. As a minimum, frequently touched surfaces should be wiped down twice a day and one of these should be at the beginning or the end of the school day. Pupils themselves can, therefore, be encouraged to clean desks with disinfectant wipes at the beginning and end of classes.

Equipment

21. **By implementing effective hand washing as a control, it is no longer considered necessary to put in place additional cleaning, sanitising or quarantine arrangements for equipment.** Disinfecting or quarantining of equipment can be difficult and time-consuming to the point where practical activities are reduced or not taking place and learners' education is affected.

22. The cleaning of almost all equipment can return to the standard protocols for such items, as the risk of picking up coronavirus from touching a surface is relatively low.
23. As eye protection is in direct contact with the face, the Department would recommend that it should still continue to be disinfected in the same way as before. It would also be helpful to wipe items that come directly into contact with the face between users such as microscope/spectroscope eyepieces.
24. If there is an event that could potentially lead to greater contamination – such as someone coughing or sneezing on equipment then the item should be cleaned or quarantined before another user touches it. The chances of this being an issue are lessened in situations where the user is wearing a face covering.
25. The sharing of equipment between pupils is acceptable (note - the sharing of musical instruments is not recommended – see Section on Music). However, sharing of equipment may mean pupils coming into extremely close contact, so efforts should continue to be made to reduce the need for sharing as far as possible.

PE

26. Schools will be aware that both indoor and outdoor PE and extra-curricular sporting activities are permitted without COVID related restrictions on the numbers of participants.
27. In the delivery of PE and wider sporting activities, schools should have due regard to wider public health requirements and the guidance provided by individual sporting governing bodies around safe delivery.
28. **In 2021/22, it is again strongly recommended that schools allow children to come to school in their PE uniform on relevant days to minimise the need for changing.**

29. Changing rooms continue to be considered a higher risk environment and schools should minimise the need for changing wherever possible. This approach also provides extended time for PE and Games within the curriculum.
30. Following a risk assessment, if the use of changing rooms is considered necessary, schools should ensure mitigating actions are in place. This includes ensuring that changing rooms are as well ventilated as possible, used only by small numbers at any point in time to maximise physical distancing, and that close attention is paid to cleaning surfaces after use.
31. Schools will also note there should be no handshakes at the beginning or end of any sporting activity and there should be no sharing of water bottles.
32. Schools are permitted to work with external coaches, clubs and organisations for sporting activities.
- 33. The Department recommends that schools should provide children and young people with at least two hours of curricular PE each week and this recommendation has never been more important.** Two hours of good quality provision contributes to the well-being and development of resilience and allows for the progression of skills, knowledge and understanding in the range of activity areas that make up the PE curriculum.
34. We know that PE has a wide range of both physical and emotional benefits. In recent years, there is also a growing evidence base to suggest that physical activity has the potential to support learning more broadly. Research has shown that physical activity can improve short-term memory, reaction time and creativity; it increases attention span, coordination and complex thinking and enhances behaviour and academic achievement. The Department, therefore, highlights its critical importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also vital that indoor space is prioritised to support the delivery of PE in the curriculum.

Music and Drama

35. The EA has prepared detailed guidance for schools on the delivery of music, *Music Unlocked: Guidance For Schools* ([Music Unlocked Guidance](#)). This was updated on 23 August 2021. It is based on guidance from Music Mark, the former Federation of UK Music Services. Schools will wish to familiarise themselves with this guidance, which provides a framework for the delivery of music in schools.
36. Face coverings can be removed to facilitate music and drama where social distancing is possible. For example, if choir practice was arranged in the school hall with social distancing in place, coverings can be removed.

Further Advice and Guidance

37. We are conscious that science around COVID-19 is evolving quite rapidly and guidance, for example, around the cleaning and sanitising of equipment is identical internationally or even within the UK across different jurisdictions. Consequently, we have provided general high level mitigations, which are designed to be helpful and practicable to schools, to reduce risk and highlight key considerations but these are not absolute in all respects.
38. Further advice and guidance for schools on practical work in science and technology can be accessed from CLEAPSS (Consortium of Local Education Authorities for the Provision of Science Services). Schools in Northern Ireland have automatic membership of CLEAPSS through the EA. In particular, *GL343– Guide to doing practical work during the COVID-19 Pandemic – Science*, will provide additional information for schools.