



8 January 2021

Dear Principal,

The Government decision, taken on 6 January, on foot of public health advice to reduce mobility in the community, was to close schools for the vast majority of students for a period of three weeks. The Government decided to prioritise in-person teaching and learning for two specific cohorts; pupils/ students attending special schools and classes and final year Leaving Certificate students. This decision was supported by the public health advice available to Government.

There has been continuous engagement with education partners on this matter since Monday, building on weekly engagement between partners and public health throughout the school year. Despite the confirmation by Public Health that schools remain safe, unfortunately it has not proved possible to get agreement to provide in-person learning for these groups.

In these circumstances, there is no alternative but to pause the limited reopening on Monday subject to further engagement. As of Monday 11 January students, including children with special needs, should be provided with a programme of remote learning.

The Department is conscious that closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family and societal level. For children, it impacts on wellbeing, learning, on social and emotional development.

School closure has significant impacts on children with special educational needs. School closure also heightens student anxiety, particularly for the Leaving Certificate cohort, in relation to state examinations.

It is important to note that NPHE remains of the view that schools are low risk environments.

This letter is to inform you of the arrangements, requirements and resources to support remote learning for pupils/students.

During this time, all teachers, including special education teachers (SETs), are required to continue to support teaching and learning for all pupils/students in their class/subject group or on their caseload.

### **Remote Learning Provision**

The public health restrictions which resulted in the closure of schools in March 2020 highlighted the absolute necessity for schools to be agile in providing for continuity of schooling in the future. As a contingency measure for the possibility of partial or full



school closures, the Department has already provided a suite of guidance materials, agreed with the education partners, to enable schools to mediate the curriculum safely for all pupils/students in a Covid-19 context. Those guidance materials were issued to schools and centres for education as they were published and are available at [gov.ie](http://gov.ie) and at the links below.

- [Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19: Context: September –December 2020 For primary schools and special schools](#)
- [Guidance on Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning in a COVID-19 Context For post-primary schools and centres for education.](#)

These documents have been complemented by [Circular 0074/2020](#) which required all schools to put in place appropriate contingency measures to ensure that they are prepared to continue to support teaching and learning in the event of a partial or full closure of schools arising from Public Health advice.

It is crucially important that the learning of all pupils/students, especially those with special educational needs (SEN) and those at risk of educational disadvantage and/or early school leaving, are supported at this time. TUSLA Education Support Services will engage with principals to promote connectedness to schools for children who are at risk of educational disadvantage and there will be direct liaison by education welfare officers to Direct Provision accommodation centres, refuges for families experiencing domestic violence and homeless hubs to ensure students are linked with their schools. Updated guidance on supporting children with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage will also issue to schools this week.

The following requirements in relation to remote teaching and learning of all pupils/students are particularly important:

- **Regular engagement with pupils/students:** It is important that teachers engage with their pupils/students; in a primary setting this should, ideally, be on a daily basis; in a post-primary context teachers should, as far as possible, engage with students as per the normal school timetable.
- **A blend of guided and independent learning tasks/experiences:** Teacher-pupil/student engagement should involve both direct teaching by the teacher and the assignment of independent learning tasks for completion by the pupils/students.
- **Appropriate and engaging learning opportunities:** Teachers should ensure that the chosen learning tasks give pupils/students an opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a clear and concise way.
- **Learning tasks:** The tasks chosen should be specifically aligned to the needs of the pupil/student, including pupils/students with SEN, and should enable the teacher to monitor progress and give constructive, developmental feedback to support the next stages in their learning.
- **Two-way feedback between home and school:** Schools should ensure that two-way feedback between teachers and parents/guardians and between teachers and their pupils/students is encouraged and supported. Schools should provide manageable and accessible opportunities for all pupils/ students



to regularly share samples of their work with the teacher(s) throughout each week. Teachers should ensure that work received is corrected and relevant feedback is provided.

- **Support for pupils/students with SEN:** Special education teachers (SETs) should continue to engage with the pupils/students on their caseloads and class/subject teachers should differentiate teaching and learning in line with their pupils'/students' needs to minimise disruption to their learning and progression.

Please note that, given the importance of ensuring continuity and progression in pupils'/students' learning, teachers are permitted to travel and attend their place of work to provide continuity of teaching and learning if they are unable to do so from their home and school buildings remain accessible for teaching and learning and other essential services. This includes for the provision of school meals. It also includes schools where childcare services for children of essential workers and vulnerable children are to remain open.

Arrangements should be made to facilitate the collection of books as soon as possible. Parents/students should be provided with allocated times in order to facilitate this in a safe manner.

In addition the availability of appropriate digital devices may be a challenge for some families in your school. Schools can make arrangements to loan devices to pupils/students to use at home for the duration of the closure. You are also asked to ensure that all teachers in your school have access to the necessary digital technology to support pupils'/students' remote learning.

If some of your pupils/students live in areas with poor internet infrastructure, other strategies such as using the postal service, phone calls or emails as a means of communicating with these pupils/students should be considered.

You will be aware that the Department has provided supports in the form of specific funding and teacher professional development to enable schools to provide for remote teaching and learning:

- Over the period of implementation of the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 Enhancing Teaching Learning and Assessment*, €210m has issued to schools through ICT Grant funding, including €100m during 2020.
- The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) Digital Technologies team has developed a range of materials to assist teachers in using an online platform to support teaching, learning and assessment. Schools can also apply to the PDST to access a PDST advisor.
- There is a range of supports available from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Junior



Cycle for Teachers, An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, National Educational Psychological Services Education Centres and the Centre for School Leadership.

- The Inspectorate of the Department will continue to offer an advisory service to schools to support the delivery of remote learning and to provide assistance to school leaders in particular. The Inspectorate will also evaluate and report on the quality of educational provision for students and will continue to carry out its other work as set out in Circulars 40/2020 and 41/2020.

The Zero rating of education websites put in place during the first period of school closures have been maintained by a number of telecoms providers and there is a range of unlimited mobile data packages on offer by the market.

### **Arrangements for special schools and special classes**

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) will communicate directly with schools on the range of supports available to special schools and schools with special classes. Schools can continue to avail of support: <https://ncse.ie/school-support>. During this period the NCSE is setting up a dedicated phone line where teachers in a special school or special class can speak directly to an advisor. This new phone number is 01 603 3233.

### **Supports for pupils/ students and schools**

Guidance supports should continue to be made available to all students in the manner deemed most appropriate by the school.

The majority of schools that avail of the school meals programme put arrangements in place to ensure that pupils had continued access to school meals during the previous school closure period. The Department will work closely with the Department of Social Protection and the schools involved to ensure the continuation of the school meals programme during this period also.

As noted above, the advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team is that schools are low risk environments; the decision to move to remote learning has been taken to help reduce the movement of large numbers of the population on a daily basis and so help curb the spread of the virus.

It should also be noted that educational staff are deemed to be essential workers with regards to childcare, and as such, childcare arrangements in respect of essential workers apply to staff in this time period. Further details regarding these arrangements can be accessed here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f64cc-resumption-of-the-pre-school-programme-postponed-and-childcare-services-to-remain-open-for-the-children-of-essential-workers-and-vulnerable-children-only-until-01-february/>



### **Wellbeing**

This is not an easy time for pupils/students, teachers or their families. Staff, students and their families who are experiencing particularly challenging times can be directed, as appropriate, to the support services available at [www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/together/](http://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/together/) or to the resources and supports provided by agencies such as the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS), the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) or the Employee Assistance and Wellbeing Programme. Schools may also consult with NEPS in relation to the academic, social and emotional needs of their pupils/students.

The resources developed by NEPS psychologists to support students and parents will be re-circulated and promoted directly via social media over the coming period.

Guidance on staff wellbeing is available [here](#) along with details of the Department's Employee Assistance Service and Freephone confidential helpline, provided by Spectrum Life under the banner 'Wellbeing Together: Folláine Le Chéile' and available to all staff.

### **Maintenance and construction**

In line with the underlying rationale of the further public health measures announced, school authorities should not undertake any non-essential maintenance/construction works at this time (including those which may have been envisaged under minor works grant funding).

The Department of Education confirms that in line with the Government decision and provided for under S.I. No. 4 of 2021, that the construction or development of essential educational facilities at primary and post-primary level, including school building projects, which will provide additional capacity for students or involve essential maintenance or refurbishment works in support of the continued provision of education may continue.

### **Certain Employee Matters**

The Department confirms that the arrangements previously outlined to the Education Partners for certain employee matters during the previous school closure in 2020 will also apply during the period of closure beginning January 11. Recruitment and supervision arrangements previously outlined, as well as the provisions of Circulars 49/2020, 50/2020 and 54/2020 remain in place for employees attending the workplace but any future changes decided upon will be circulated as normal.

Any request for cancellation of leave already approved by the management authority should only be considered in exceptional circumstances in accordance with the terms



of the individual leave scheme and where a substitute replacement has not been contracted to cover the leave absence

Thank you for your continued support for the education of all pupils/students during the coming weeks.

Regards,

Deirdre Shanley

Assistant Secretary – Head of Schools