



5 May 2021

Dear Principal,

The Government has announced on 29 April a phased easing of public health restrictions outlined in *COVID-19 – Recovery and Resilience: The Path Ahead*. It is timely as we begin the last term of this school year, notwithstanding the recently announced phased easing of public health restrictions, to reflect on how current public health measures continue to support and underpin those school activities that traditionally take place in the last school term, for example school tours and trips, class graduations and sports days.

Sixth class graduations/class celebrations

The final months of the academic year are a time of excitement and occasion for all children and in particular those children in sixth class, as they look forward with anticipation and celebration to the traditional rites of passage which generally include extra-curricular and co-curricular activities as well as ceremonies to mark the end of the school year.

While it will not be possible for schools to carry these out in the traditional format again this year, schools can continue to hold end of year graduation ceremonies for sixth class pupils and should maintain any such ceremonies within the existing pods and bubble structure. Schools will be in a position to hold this ceremony in the school and while there has been a further easing of restrictions, schools will not be in a position to facilitate the attendance of parents or other family members.

Schools are also encouraged to explore ways of marking the occasion remotely for family members, by hosting virtual connectivity or prerecording videos that can be sent to them to capture and celebrate a pupil's time in school.

Certificates of achievement, photo stories, scrapbooks and other memorabilia can also form part of the celebration. The core objective of any decision for holding a ceremony, is that any activity is operated in a safe manner and must adhere to public health advice.

School tours/ trips / use of buses

The Department has published guidance for schools that provide various teaching and learning approaches, including bringing pupils outdoors and to



local amenities to enhance learning, support social distancing, promote physical activity and help positive wellbeing.

While from 10 May the easing of public health restriction provides for travel between counties, schools are encouraged to minimise the use of buses for school tours this year, to keep it local and avoid long trips. Where buses are involved in a school trip, it would be better to avoid whole year groups going on the same trip.

Decisions in relation to educational trips are a matter for each individual school authority and it is the responsibility of each school authority to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place while children are participating in school trips and that all such activities are in line with public health guidelines.

Use of buses

With regard to guidance for private hire of transport services by schools (for school activities such as tours, sports activities, etc.), while such services are not within the remit of the Department's School Transport Scheme and any such arrangements are a matter for schools to organise and manage locally, the Department advises that any private transport arrangements organised by a school should comply with the general guidelines for children using School Transport Scheme Services, which are:

- Do not use transport if displaying obvious symptoms.
- Maintain physical distancing while waiting for transport.
- Always sit in pre-assigned seating which will be next to a sibling or a child from their class group where possible (this should be the same child at all times).
- Use hand sanitiser prior to or on boarding the bus.
- Observe respiratory etiquette at all times – cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue and dispose of it properly, or by coughing or sneezing into their elbow while waiting for and on-board transport services.
- Disembark the bus one by one in an orderly fashion.

Contact Sports/ Sports Days

The Department has published guidance that the use of external coaches or tutors is at the discretion of the board of management of a school, which



must satisfy itself that these visitors are Garda vetted, adhere to public health advice, are trained by their governing bodies with regard to COVID-19 and fully implement the school's COVID-19 response plan.

Sports days are an enjoyable part of the end of school term activities and help to form happy childhood memories of time spent in school. Schools can hold school sports days, without the attendance of parents or family members. Schools must ensure that sport days and all sporting activities are in accordance with the school's COVID-19 response plan with particular emphases on holding such activities within the existing pods and bubble structure.

Importance of Public Health Measures

The importance and impact of public health measures within schools to prevent the onward spread of COVID-19 infection has been repeatedly shown in schools with low positivity amongst close contacts. It is really important that these measures continue to be implemented, and that families are encouraged to support schools in keeping COVID-19 out of schools, by ensuring they follow national public health guidance, and staying away if anyone has and symptoms of COVID-19 infection.

I wish your school community a safe and enjoyable summer term.

Yours faithfully,

Deirdre Shanley
Assistant Secretary