



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

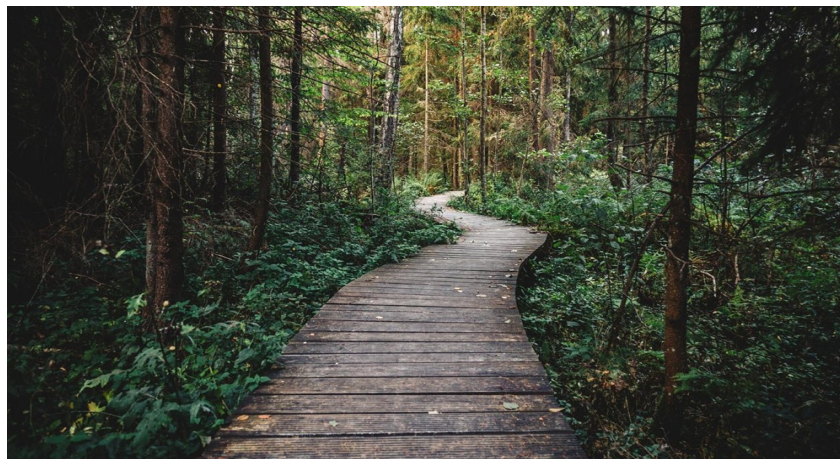
Spring Back to School

Supporting the Wellbeing of School Communities: Guidance for Schools

Returning to School: Spring 2021

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1. Introduction

We continue to live through exceptional times. Schools have been closed for prolonged periods over the past year and we have been required to stay at home as we grappled with three waves of Covid-19 and the associated public health measures. Families and school communities have experienced considerable challenges adapting to remote learning and the narrowing of our wider family and social support circles. We have also been naturally worried about the risks to our physical health and that of our loved ones. These challenges have and continue to impact on our wellbeing in different ways and at different times.

We all acknowledge the significant national contribution that was made last Autumn by teachers, principals and entire school communities when they successfully reopened schools, bringing a sense of calm and stability to families in Ireland. As schools are reopening for a second time, we know that most children, young people and school staff are again looking forward to reconnecting with each other and settling back into school life. Many of us will naturally feel anxious about the physical return to school. That is a normal response. School communities have worked very hard, with support and guidance from the Departments of Education and Health, to ensure that we are doing this in the safest possible way. This work will continue on an ongoing basis to maintain the safety of all in the school community. While there are indications that remote teaching and learning has worked well for most during this recent period of school closure, many of us are worried about children and young people's learning and socialisation, given their overall experiences over the past year. This is also a perfectly normal concern in what are extraordinary times.

It is important to remember that we all have an inbuilt capacity to adapt. Despite the fact that we may all be feeling a little jaded, missing friends and families and struggling with uncertainty about the future, we have also learned many new skills and have rapidly adapted to finding new ways of staying connected and active. This is what is at the heart of resilience. We know, however, that the experience of the past year has not been the same for everyone. Many of us will have coped well, experiencing good days and bad days. Some may have thrived on the challenges that Covid has brought but others of us will have experienced much greater adversity and impact on our physical and mental health. Some may have thrived on the challenges that Covid has brought, but others of us will have experienced much greater adversity and impact on our physical and mental health.

The effects of this range of experiences must be considered as we plan for a successful return to learning and school life for all. It may be helpful to see the return as the restart of a journey, taking stock of where we are and our next steps towards our destination, rather than focusing on what we might have lost or on the length of the journey. While the period of school closure certainly means that many of our children and young people are out of practice in some areas, it is really important to remember that they have not lost all of their previously learned skills and knowledge. For most, once they are back in the familiar environment of school, supported by their teachers, these skills will come back as they re-engage with learning and move forward. Some of course, will need more support to re-adjust to the school routine, in line with the school's continuum of support. Each school context is different and therefore this general guidance is intended to be adapted by school



communities in preparing and devising plans for supporting wellbeing when navigating this journey.

The next section of this document, Section 2, considers the essential guiding principles for fostering resilience during times of uncertainty. Sections 3 and 4 reflect on how schools have provided and will continue to provide a responsive continuum of support that addresses the range of experiences and impact on the school community. Signposts to external supports and useful resources that may complement schools' support for members of the community are also included. A focus on school staff wellbeing is included in Section 5. Partnering with parents and encouraging student voice and agency are also key elements of this guidance, as outlined in Sections 6 and 7. Finally, this guidance is supplemented with links to additional resources and support, set out in Section 8, and available on [gov.ie/backtoschool](https://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

2. Essential Guiding Principles

Supporting the wellbeing of school communities as schools reopen this spring is helped by fostering resilience using the same five key principles¹ that have been used to foster resilience in school communities throughout the pandemic. We have all learned a great deal from our experience of returning to school in the autumn of 2020 and we are therefore better equipped to understand and apply these key principles in our school context as we face the challenge of the weeks ahead.

- Promoting a **sense of safety** – so that people feel that they are safe, physically and psychologically, and that those around them are safe
- Promoting a **sense of calm** – so that people feel relaxed, composed and grounded (regulated)
- Promoting a **sense of belonging and connectedness** – so that people experience reconnecting with their friends and colleagues, and those who understand and support them in the school community
- Promoting a **sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy** – so that people believe that they can manage and do what is needed individually and as a school community
- Promoting a **sense of hope** – so that people believe that things will work out well

Supporting a successful return is best achieved when those within the school community feel safe, calm and hopeful, when they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to their school community and feel that they can manage with the support of their community.

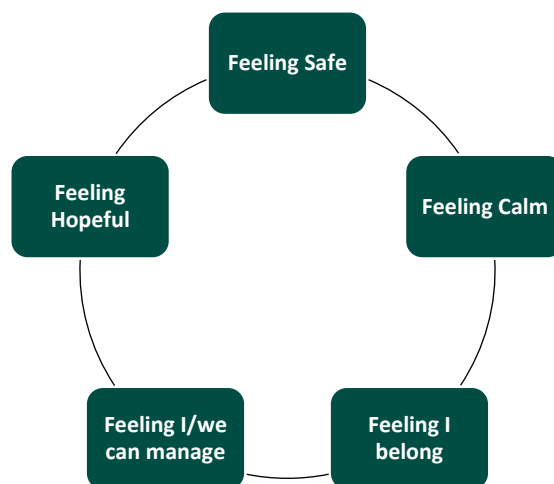


Figure 1: Key Goals for the School Community

¹ This guidance is underpinned by the framework developed by Hobfoll et al. (2007) for supporting resilience and optimal returning to normalcy during and after traumatic events

3. Continuum of Support for the Return to School

As schools reopen there may be additional changes in school rules and routines to keep everyone safe. All schools are different and each school will know how best to support the return to in-school teaching and learning within its own context.

The Continuum of Support framework (Figure 2) supports a whole-school approach to planning for the return to school and helps to ensure that staff, students and parents feel welcome, safe and secure. It also recognises that some students will require more targeted intervention and planning to help them reconnect with their school community and re-engage with learning.

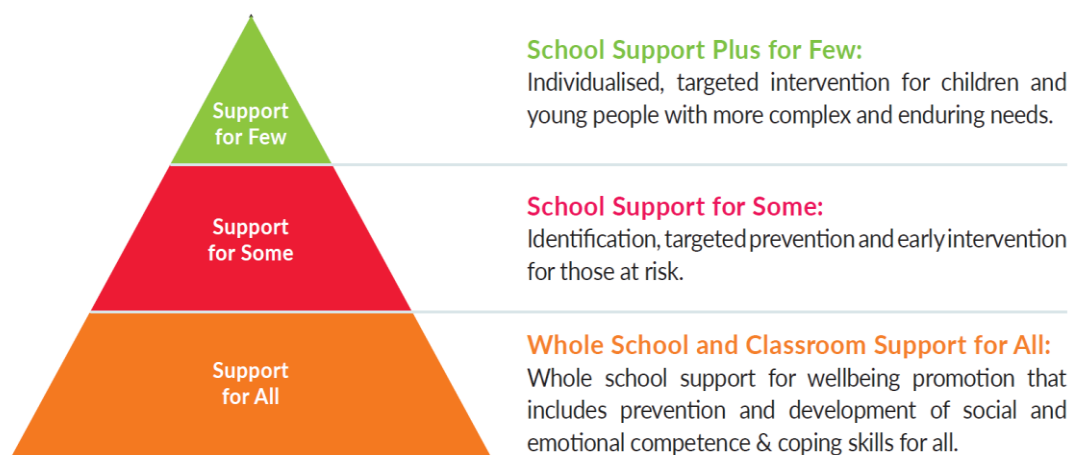


Figure 2: The Department/NEPS Continuum of Support Framework

4. Reopening Schools: Supporting Wellbeing

4.1. Level 1: Universal Response for All Students

At a universal level a whole school response is required to support the wellbeing of all within the school community as we reopen schools.



At a universal level a whole school response is required to support the wellbeing of all within the school community as we reopen schools. This response encompasses the following elements:

4.1.1. Implementing physical safety measures

Schools have been provided with further practical guidance and support around the safety measures that need to be put in place in order to support a safe return to school for all. Understanding the importance of the safety measures that need to be in place requires clear and accessible messaging and school staff, parent and student awareness-raising. Younger children or those with special educational or additional needs may benefit from developmentally appropriate language and visual supports to help explain any new rules for staying safe at school. They may also need opportunities to practise new safety measures and routines.

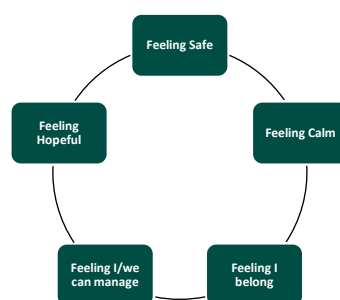
4.1.2. Settling In – Slow Down to Catch Up

It may take a little time for staff and students to adjust to being back in the school environment once again and to be ready and available to engage fully with teaching and learning. A sense of urgency about returning to the curriculum is natural but time spent on settling the students and getting the students *ready* for learning will yield positive outcomes in the longer term and will reduce stress. So it is important that teachers and school staff in preparing for formal teaching and learning consider the important issues of readiness for learning and focusing on wellbeing.

- We know that routines create a sense of psychological safety by providing predictability. Re-establishing routines or creating new ones will contribute to a safe and calm learning environment and give students a sense of security.
- We are likely to see a variety of responses amongst our students as schools reopen ranging from excitement and happiness to worry and anxiety, which are normal responses to unprecedented events.
- Normalising feelings by communicating that we have all struggled with aspects of the latest school closure and school reopening, will help to create a safe environment for students. (*It's normal to feel anxious when things are changed*).

- Remember that adults in the school are important role models for students. Modelling calm responses and coping strategies will help students learn helpful ways of managing their fears and anxieties. When talking with students it is helpful to reframe some of the negative discourse that they may be hearing by focusing, for example, on what they have learned and how they have managed, rather than what they have missed out on or what they have to catch up on. An over-focus on what they may have lost, is disempowering and anxiety-provoking and may lead to disengagement. Focusing on what we have learned and what we can do next will build a sense of efficacy and agency.
- Some students will need some time to adjust to sitting, focusing and concentrating for the lengths of time they may have been able to manage prior to school closure. Shorter learning intervals, followed by regular, safe movement breaks (even standing up and stretching), will help to support increased concentration and focus. As with last September, all children and young people will benefit from time to engage in calming and regulating activities, such as physical activity, drawing, music and relaxation/breathing exercises. They also need plenty of sleep so emphasising the importance of re-establishing school time routines such as bedtimes and winding-down activities will be important. In the first weeks back, a break from homework or keeping it to a minimum will help to reduce anxiety and allow children the time needed for rest and exercise following a longer school day than they have been used to.
- Different cohorts of students will require a different wellbeing focus:
 - Students taking State Examinations in 2021 may need particular support to remain calm and hopeful
 - Students with special or additional educational needs may need support to feel safe and to reconnect
 - Students in sixth class who will transition to secondary school may be apprehensive about this significant milestone

Take time as a school staff to consider the needs within your community, and how the school might best promote wellbeing in order to achieve the following:

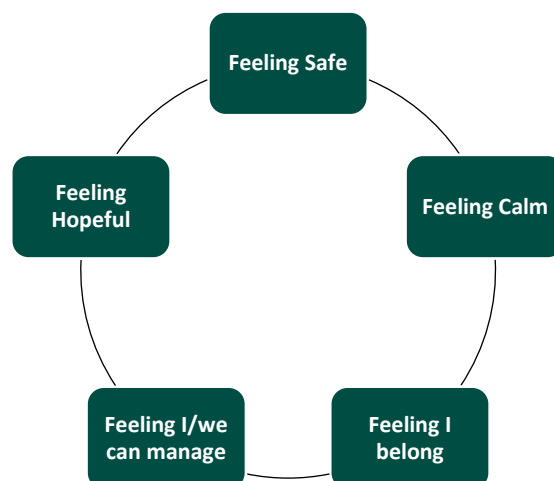


The NEPS Wellbeing Webinars and Wellbeing Toolkits for Teachers, which were developed for the September 2020 return to school, continue to be relevant and will provide advice, suggestions and resources to support you as a staff to generate ideas and a plan for wellbeing promotion for your school during this second return to school. These are available at gov.ie/backtoschool.

4.1.3. Communicating Key Messages within the School Community:

Key messages that may be considered for children and parents from their schools, that will support the wellbeing of the school community at this time include:

- Everyone is returning to school after a period of remote teaching and learning. Schools are really looking forward to welcoming students back and helping them re-engage with learning in school.
- Most students will be looking forward to school and meeting up with friends, teachers and other school staff. Many will feel excited, relieved and happy. Some may feel a little anxious and worried about getting back. That's to be expected and it's a normal response at a time of transition and change. Most students will settle in over time, as they reconnect with friends and get used to the new school safety routines.
- Our school has been working very hard to make sure that the school building and playground will be safe for all of the students, teachers and parents. This may mean some new routines and rules to keep everyone safe. We will support you to learn these new routines and rules.
- School staff know that wellbeing is important and needed for learning to happen. We are prioritising the things that we know will promote wellbeing at this time.
- School staff know that parents have made great efforts to support their child's continued education during the remote teaching and learning and that parents have done their best. Teachers will be starting with where every student is at.
- Getting back to a school routine, getting enough sleep, eating healthily, taking physical exercise, taking some time to be creative and reconnecting with friends will help everyone to settle back in.
- These messages have been included in a series of short videos developed for children/young people and parents, which schools may wish to circulate to families, as appropriate. Details on accessing them are available in Section 8 of this document.



4.2 Levels 2 and 3: Targeted and Individualised Response for Some/Few Students

Some students and their families may need additional help to settle back into school. It is important to take notice of and plan to support students who don't settle after an initial period, despite having had access to universal support.



Students who struggle to settle back into school may include those who:

- are reluctant to attend school
- have been absent due to illness/for medical reasons
- were previously identified as having special educational and/or additional needs
- have experienced loss/grief (bereaved/illness/family illness)
- have experienced significant social isolation
- have become or are at risk of becoming disengaged from learning
- demonstrate behaviour that seems different or out of character

These students will require support that is in addition to the universal wellbeing supports being provided for all students. Some students' needs may have emerged over the course of this pandemic, while others may have had existing needs prior to school closure. These students may find the return to school challenging and require additional support to help them to adjust and settle back in once again. Actively involving students in the planning for their return to schools will help reduce their worries and rebuild a sense of belonging and connection. Ensuring that students are provided with appropriate opportunities to re-engage with class teachers, special education teachers and special needs assistants, as appropriate, will help support the return to school. Existing student support plans, where available, should be reviewed and amended as appropriate. Where student support plans have not previously been provided, they should be developed in collaboration with parents to identify current strengths and needs and enhance the effectiveness of intervention planning.

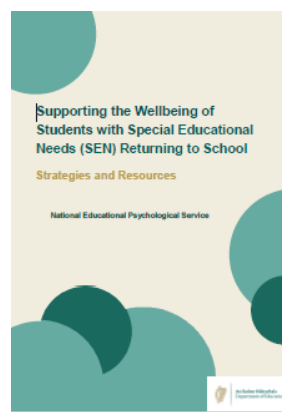
For students who continue to struggle to re-engage with learning after the initial settling back period, the following approaches may be helpful:

- Adopting a strengths-based approach – using the student's strengths, interests and abilities to build resilience and foster a sense of belonging;
- Helping students to cope with worries by teaching and practising strategies such as deep breathing, relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, problem-solving by breaking tasks into small, more manageable steps, providing information in accessible format, and using story-telling and other techniques to navigate fears, create solutions and build resilience;
- Fostering social connections and friendships;
- Differentiating universal approaches and responses using social stories, schedules, visual approaches etc. Teaching skills to support adapting to new routines when at school, including explicit teaching and support about hygiene requirements using visuals, videos and repetition to reinforce key messages;
- Using targeted programmes to develop social and emotional competence;

- Ensuring ongoing collaboration between parents, students and teachers.

For those students unable to return to school immediately (e.g. due to health concerns), ongoing distant learning supports will continue to be required. Regular on-line engagement between these students and their teachers will provide a sense of normality and connection, and contribute to the student's sense of wellbeing. Schools may also consult with NEPS in relation to the academic, social and emotional needs of these students.

Further suggestions are available in the NEPS Wellbeing Toolkit – Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs Returning to School – available on gov.ie/backtoschool [here](#).



Schools will be supported with this response by the provision of a range of further guidance and support from Department of Education support services and agencies², in particular NEPS and the NCSE (www.ncse.ie), together with the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and HSE services. These are being communicated via the gov.ie/backtoschool webpage.

5. Promoting School Staff Wellbeing

Everyone will have had different experiences of this latest period of school closure and public health restrictions. The ongoing nature of the pandemic can be challenging and feel relentless and exhausting. Whole school approaches to wellbeing which include promoting a positive school culture and ethos, good relationships and a well-managed return to school for all, can have a positive influence on staff wellbeing. Student wellbeing is influenced by the wellbeing of the adults around them. Students pick up on the stress of others so it is important that adults model positive ways of coping with change and the return to school. It is especially important, therefore, that adults in the school are proactive and look after their own wellbeing, and seek support if needed.

² The Department's support services/agencies include the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), Centre for School Leadership (CSL), National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Support Service, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

The Department recognises the need for school staff wellbeing and collective self-care. Support for school staff wellbeing will be provided by Department support services including the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) as well as by the HSE's Health Promotion Team. An [Occupational Health Strategy](#) is in place as a supportive resource for staff in schools. The aim of the Occupational Health Strategy is to promote the health and wellbeing of employees in the workplace, with a strong focus on prevention. The Occupational Health Strategy comprises the Employee Assistance Service and the Occupational Health Service. The Employee Assistance Service (EAS) is provided by Spectrum life. They are providing this support under the banner of '*Wellbeing Together: Folláine Le Chéile*'.

Under the EAS, all school employees have access to a dedicated free confidential phoneline 1800 411 057 available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year providing advice on a range of issues such as wellbeing, legal, financial, mediation, management support etc. Where required, short-term counselling is available to employees and family members (over the age of 18 years and living at home). A bespoke wellbeing portal and app which offers access to a Digital Gym, Live Chat, podcasts and blogs on topics around wellbeing and mental health, family life, exercise and nutrition is also available. In addition online cognitive behavioural therapy is provided. Spectrum.life is also providing a series of digital wellbeing events including live webinars with Q & A.

Within school settings all school staff will benefit from:

- Strong leadership with regard to the importance of wellbeing and a collaborative, collegial effort with regard to reopening and reengagement with teaching and learning;
- Clear messages about the arrangements in place to reopen schools;
- Access to guidance and resources to build knowledge and awareness of how best to support the wellbeing of students on return to schools;
- Strategies to build collective staff wellness and resilience;
- Knowing how and where to get support for students (gov.ie/backtoschool) and for themselves [here](#);
- Kindness and compassion for themselves and others.



6. Partnering with Parents/Carers

It is important to partner with families to ensure a whole school community, aligned response to reopening schools successfully. Parents/carers will benefit from:

- Clear messages in a range of accessible formats about:
 - the arrangements in place to reopen schools and to keep children/young people safe;
 - how the school will support the wellbeing of students on return to school in order to support their child's re-engagement with learning;
- Acknowledgement of their efforts and challenges supporting their child's education at home/reassuring them of the support of the school;
- Gently challenge negative and deficit-oriented narratives in relation to lost learning, failing to teach children from home, and the need to catch up on months of lost teaching. Reframe the language for parents with a focus on what has been learned, gained and the resilience that children and families have demonstrated. Families and children have been dealing with difficult times and are learning and surviving, despite the challenges they have faced;
- Being invited to share examples of new experiences and progress that their children have made;
- Being invited to share with the school any concerns or worries they may have about their children;
- Knowing how and where to get support. Lots of videos and information resources have been made available to support families, on [gov.ie/backtoschool](https://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

7. Encouraging student voice and agency

It is important to remember to provide ongoing opportunities for the voices of the children/young people in a school to be heard, taken account of and given due weight, and responded to in a meaningful way. It is also important to involve students in the school plans to ensure safety as we reopen schools. Students will benefit from:

- Clear messages, communicated in a meaningful and developmentally appropriate way, about:
 - the arrangements in place to reopen schools and keep children/young people safe, and the rationale for these arrangements
 - how the school will support their wellbeing on return to school, which will in turn support their reengagement with learning
 - their own responsibilities in helping to keep the school environment safeThis may involve parents/carers supporting the communication of these messages in advance of the student returning to school, depending on their age or stage of development.
- Being invited to contribute to reviews of the whole school approach and letting them know how their views were taken into account.
- Understanding how they can proactively support their own wellbeing by getting enough sleep, establishing routines, eating healthily, getting physical exercise, taking time for creativity etc.
- Hearing that it's normal to feel anxious or worried about coming back to school. This is a time of change, and it's normal to feel anxious or worried at times of change.
- Being invited to share their concerns or worries with the school, within a safe forum
- As appropriate to their age and stage of development, knowing how and where to get support ([gov.ie/backtoschool](https://www.gov.ie/backtoschool))

8. Resources and Support for School Communities:

The foundation for the provision of a continuum of support in schools is the provision of support for school staff wellbeing, and guidance to help school staff to feel confident and equipped to support the wellbeing of their students. The Department has worked closely with its broad range of support services and agencies³, and with the HSE/HSE-funded services and the Tusla Education Support Service to create an aligned and coherent package of supports and resources to assist schools in this regard. All supports are linked on gov.ie/backtoschool.

Publication

Supporting the wellbeing of school communities as schools reopen: Guidance for schools

From [Department of Education](#)
Published on 26 July 2020
Last updated on 19 March 2021

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Supports include:

- A short video clip to communicate with parents about the return to school with key universal messages.
Parent Advice: [here](#) and [here](#)
- A range of Resources and Support for School Communities developed by NEPS:

³ The Department's Support Services/Agencies include the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), Centre for School Leadership (CSL), National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Support Service, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

- [Wellbeing Webinars](#) for primary/special/post-primary schools – supporting wellbeing as schools reopen
 - [Wellbeing Toolkits for Schools](#) with a range of easily downloadable, user-friendly materials
 - Additional guidance for schools, to supplement the Wellbeing Toolkits, [Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs \(SEN\) Returning to School](#)
 - [Advice and resources for parents, student and school staff](#) to support their wellbeing as they return and settle into school
- The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) has a wide range of CPD offerings, bespoke school support and online supports and resources available to support the implementation of a whole school wellbeing promotion process and which constitute an ongoing discussion with teachers in relation to wellbeing ([here](#)).
- Directories and catalogues of online supports to outline available wellbeing CPD and provision for primary, special and post-primary schools and parents have been developed. This information is available [here](#) and will be updated on an ongoing basis. It includes:
 - Directory of Wellbeing CPD and Support for Schools in Returning and Settling into School for Primary/Special and Post-Primary schools
 - Directory of Online Support for Schools in Returning and Settling into School for Primary/Special and Post-Primary schools
 - Directory of Wellbeing Supports & Online Resources for Parents on Returning and Settling into School for Primary/special and Post-Primary schools
- There are also links to support for school staff wellbeing provided by:
 - Spectrum.life, the new dedicated employee assistance provider for school staff has developed a range of accessible supports. These include access to a Wellbeing Content Hub, an Employee Assistance Programme and Mental Health Supports and Digital Wellbeing Events. Further details are available [here](#).
 - Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) [here](#).
 - HSE's Health Promotion Team
 - HSE/HSE-funded service providers - e-mental health services, including free on-line counselling [here](#)

NEPS psychologists will continue to connect with schools, listen to their needs and engage with schools on how best to respond.

Furthermore, for our post-primary schools, approximately 120 posts have been provided for guidance to support student wellbeing recognising the particular importance for this support in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic challenges.

Finally, our partners in the HSE and in HSE-funded services such as *Spunout*, *Jigsaw*, *MyMind*, *Childline* and *Turn2Me*, are providing access to e-mental health services, including on-line counselling, if needed. Details of the services being provided are available [here](#).