



Return of in-school teaching and learning for children with special educational needs in special schools and mainstream primary schools

15th January, 2021

Dear School Principal

1) Introduction

I am writing to you further to the Department's letter of 14th January 2021, which advised details of school safety measures, risk management, school transport, and childcare arrangements, which will support the phased reopening of schools for children with special educational needs (SEN).

The purpose of this letter is to set out in further detail the framework under which it is intended in-school teaching and learning will take place in special schools, special classes in mainstream primary schools, and for pupils with special educational needs who attend mainstream classes in primary school commencing Thursday 21st January.

The measures set out in this letter are temporary and interim and are designed to support schools until such time as schools fully reopen, which is planned to take place on 1st February, 2021.

The Department is committed to continuing to work with the education stakeholders on any issues which arise to support our common ambition of providing for in-school teaching and learning for children with special educational needs.

In preparing for the return of pupils with SEN and staff supporting these pupils, schools are asked to ensure that the risk mitigation measures that were established in September remain in place and that any additional requirements from the HPSC (for example, the need to provide medical grade masks to all SNAs and as appropriate to other school staff who are working within 2 metres of a pupil to whom they are delivering personal care or attention for a period of time) are also implemented. The attached guidance sets out the requirements for this measure:

<https://www.hpsc.ie/az/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/COVID-19%20Education%20SNA.pdf>

2) What pupils are returning to in-school teaching and learning on Thursday 21st January?

- Pupils in special schools will attend on alternate days;
- Pupils in special classes in mainstream primary schools will attend every day;



- Pupils with significant additional needs in mainstream classes in primary schools will have access to in-school teaching and learning (the framework for how this will be facilitated is set out at Sections 7-11 below).

3) How will reopening operate in Special Schools?

All special schools will reopen on 21st January.

All staff, including all teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) who work in special schools should return to work, other than in circumstances provided for by the occupational health scheme, or where staff are on approved leave.

In circumstances where staff members cannot attend due to illness, substitution arrangements will apply.

Whereas all special schools will reopen from 21st January, with all staff members attending school, the Department is conscious of the fact that special schools (notwithstanding the lower pupil teacher ratios provided for) have significant numbers of staff and pupils attending the school. This increases the overall number of persons in special schools.

Therefore, in order to reduce the number of persons on the school premises at any given time, for the period of this interim arrangement special schools may provisionally reduce the attendance of pupils at their school at any given time, by up to 50% of the total school enrolment.

This may be done by providing for pupils school attendance on alternate days.

4) Transport for Pupils attending Special Schools

School Transport Scheme services for children will resume on the 21st January. These services will fully operate with the continued additional hygiene and other measures that were introduced on school transport services at the start of the school year. With regard to children who may travel on an individual service and whereby any such child will be attending on alternate days we ask that schools liaise with their local Bus Éireann office to advise them of the days that the child or children will be attending school.

5) How will reopening operate in Special Classes in Mainstream Primary Schools?

All special classes, including early intervention special classes for children with autism or hearing impairment, in primary schools will reopen on 21st January.

All special class staff, including all teachers and SNAs in special classes should return to work, other than in circumstances provided for by the occupational health scheme or where staff are on approved leave.



In circumstances where staff members cannot attend due to illness, substitution arrangements will apply.

However, in such circumstances and where mainstream schools have special classes which also have additional SNA provision in their schools, they should assign one of their other SNAs¹ temporarily to the special class in the first instance, other than in circumstances where the SNA is supporting the return of children with special educational needs in mainstream classes to the school.

Similarly, schools may temporarily redeploy a mainstream class teacher to the special class to maintain the operation of the special class if the special class teacher is on leave.

The substitution arrangement will then apply to the reassigned SNA/mainstream class teacher.

As primary schools are partially reopening for the provision of in-school learning on 21st January, schools have capacity to utilise the whole of the school premises, as required.

Accordingly, all pupils who attend special classes should return to these classes and attend for the full school day and the full school week as normal.

6) Transport for Pupils attending Special Classes in Mainstream Schools

School Transport Scheme services for children will resume on the 21st January. These services will fully operate with the continued additional hygiene and other measures that were introduced on school transport services at the start of the school year.

7) How will reopening operate for Pupils with Significant Additional Needs who attend Mainstream Classes?

Despite the supports available, some pupils with special educational needs find it difficult to fully engage with remote learning.

Accordingly, under the interim arrangements proposed now, provision is also being made for a return to in-school teaching and learning for pupils with the most significant additional needs in mainstream classes.

¹ Section 12 of DES Circular 30/2014 in relation to the SNA scheme sets out the Role of Schools to Manage SNA Support

SNAs should be deployed by schools in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school. It is a matter for schools to allocate the support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.



All special education teachers (SET) and teachers who do not teach mainstream classes, as necessary, and all SNAs should return to school on 21st January.

The pupils with significant special educational needs who are returning to receive in-school teaching support during this period will not be able to attend their mainstream classes during the school day, in the manner in which they normally would, as the mainstream classes will still be receiving remote support.

Accordingly, the SETs should group the returning pupils with special educational needs, who normally attend mainstream classes, into temporary SET groupings.

SET groupings should be established, with the numbers in each temporary grouping being based on the range and extent of needs that the pupils have. In doing so, schools should also have regard to the requirement to comply with the public health guidelines for a safe school environment as set out in the School Covid-19 Response Plans, including the use of social distancing, respiratory and hand hygiene measures and creation of bubbles and pods as appropriate. Schools will therefore need to ensure that these groups are of manageable size to comply with the public health measures.

Pupils attending these temporary SET groupings will be supported by SNAs, where such SNA support had previously been provided for them in the mainstream setting. Schools may also redeploy SNA support from within their total SNA allocation, where required but are asked to be mindful of the need to minimise movement between groups and SNAs during this interim period to continue to support a safe school environment.

8) Transport for Mainstream Pupils with Significant Additional Needs

School Transport Scheme services for children will resume on the 21st January. These services will fully operate with the continued additional hygiene and other measures that were introduced on school transport services at the start of the school year. With regard to children with significant additional needs in mainstream primary classes who avail of school transport, we ask schools to liaise with their local Bus Éireann office to identify travel requirements for these children.

9) Teaching and Learning for mainstream pupils with significant additional needs during this period

It is not expected that the SET should provide for the full curricular programme for the pupils attending the special groupings, who may be of different ages and ability ranges.

Rather, the SET should provide additional teaching support to the pupils in conjunction with and under the direction of the child's mainstream class teacher, in the same manner in which they would if the school were open for all pupils to attend. The SET should communicate with the class teacher as necessary and also have regard to the pupil's student support plan



Schools should have regard to the number of pupils with special educational needs that they can provide for, relative to the number of SETs, or additional non mainstream teachers, that a school has.

However, all schools have an allocation of SET support and can provide some level of in-school teaching support for pupils with significant additional needs. Where schools operate in a cluster arrangement for special education teaching, such as small schools who may not have a full SET post, school principals should work collaboratively to best support as much in-school provision as possible.

It is important the pupils who are prioritised for return to in school teaching support are those with the greatest level of need and who are least able to avail of remote teaching support.

Examples of how this might operate in practice are being developed and will issue to schools early next week.

10) How will schools identify pupils with significant additional needs in mainstream classes to be prioritised for in-school teaching?

Schools will be aware of the pupils in mainstream classes who have the most significant needs and can be identified as a priority group for in-school teaching during this period:

These will be the pupils who the school has already identified as requiring the greatest level of additional teaching support under the Continuum of Support framework, as follows:

- They are the pupils in mainstream schools who present with the most significant learning needs and **are accessing the highest levels of support in school at the School Support Plus/Support for a Few stage of the Continuum of Support** (including children with Autism, Down syndrome, sensory impairments, and other disabilities.) This will include the pupils who were identified for the summer provision programme last year.
- A student support plan will generally have been developed for pupils in receipt of school support plus which will include detailed and individualised planning for that pupils learning needs.
- Pupils with more complex and enduring needs will generally have been identified by schools to receive specific individualised interventions, teaching approaches and/or learning activities.



- They will have been recorded on the ‘School Provision Plan of Pupils with Special Educational Needs who are in receipt of interventions through the Continuum of Support Framework’ as those pupils in receipt of School Support Plus.
- They are pupils who have a level of special educational need which is beyond the additional teaching support provided for children with mild learning difficulties, or who require some additional teaching support in literacy and numeracy at whole school support or additional classroom support level.

[Guidance](#) is available to schools as to how to identify pupils for additional special education teaching support and as to how to prioritise pupils for the highest level of support.

Schools should identify the pupils within this priority group and liaise with parents as to the arrangements which will be put in place to allow them to return to in-school teaching during this period.

11) Can in-school teaching happen for any other pupils in schools during this period?

Yes. Having provided for in school teaching support for the pupils with the most significant level of special educational needs, as set out above, where schools continue to have capacity to provide for other children who also have significant additional teaching needs, they may do so.

While the clear priority is to support in-school teaching for children with significant additional needs, schools have the flexibility to support vulnerable children too. Schools can only do so where they are satisfied that they have provided appropriately for the children with significant additional needs but where there remains capacity to support other pupils, schools have the flexibility to consider vulnerable pupils. Schools are best placed to identify pupils enrolled in their school who may be considered vulnerable. In doing so, schools may wish to consider factors, not limited to but, for example those related to a pupil’s personal development, features of their family life or because of wider influences that impact on them within their community, or other factors which may contribute to educational disadvantage.

12) Where it is not possible to provide in-school teaching and learning for all pupils with significant additional needs, what supports can schools provide?

The Updated Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs (with separate guidance for mainstream primary/special schools and



for post-primary schools) advises schools and teachers as to how they can support continuity in the learning of pupils with special educational needs during the school closures associated with COVID-19.

This guidance has now been provided for schools and is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance builds on the key messages in a range of guidance materials which were issued to schools and centres for education as they were published. Specific guidance has been published by the Department to support schools in the context of remote teaching and learning in a COVID-19 context - *Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19 Context: September – December 2020* which was complemented by the Department of Education Circular Letter 0074/2020 in relation to the establishment of Digital Communication, Teaching and Learning Platforms.

Conclusion

The Department and education partners are agreed to continue to work together to support schools, pupils and parents during this period. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document is being finalised to issue to schools early next week which will continue to be updated as required.

Yours faithfully,

Martina Mannion
Assistant Secretary General