



Information Note SD 0003/2022

To: The Managerial Authorities of all recognised Primary, Post Primary and Special Schools

Updated Covid-19 Guidance to Schools following the mid-term break 2022

This note is to inform schools of the new public health advice from 28th February 2022. It is understood that schools may need time in order to make any adjustments depending on their own circumstances. It is not expected that any work will be undertaken over the mid-term break.

On 21st of January 2022, the Government announced the easing of a number of public health measures. The infection prevention control measures and restrictions in school settings were to remain in place until 28th February 2022, so that all children of school going age would have the opportunity to avail of the Covid-19 vaccines.

On 17th February 2022, NPHE reviewed the remaining public health measures including the infection prevention control measures and restrictions in school settings.

Having closely considered relevant epidemiological data and other matters as set out in their letter of 17 February 2022, the Government has accepted the recommendations of the NPHE to remove remaining restrictions relating to mask-wearing and physical distancing in schools. If members of staff or students wish to continue wearing face masks or coverings, they may do so.

Continued use of good infection prevention and control measures such as hand washing, respiratory hygiene, and ventilation is advised.

Critical components of the collective response in relation to COVID-19 continue to apply including self-isolation if symptomatic (even if fully vaccinated/boosted) or if having a positive COVID-19 test.



In general, schools should now resume normal school routines and normal teaching and learning activities.

Staying at home if you have symptoms

The requirement to stay at home if you have symptoms remains – for students and staff alike. One of the key messages to manage the risks of COVID-19 is to do everything practical to avoid the introduction of COVID-19 into the school. If infection is not introduced it cannot be spread.

Hand Hygiene

Schools should continue to promote good hygiene. Hand hygiene can be achieved by hand washing or use of a hand sanitiser (when hands look clean). Funding will continue to issue to schools for the purchase of PPE, including hand sanitiser.

Face coverings/mask wearing

It is no longer a requirement for staff or pupils/students to wear a face covering/mask in school. Staff and student/pupils can continue to wear a face covering/mask if they wish to do so on a personal basis and schools should continue to make masks available on request as they are currently doing. Funding to support the purchase of PPE, including masks, will continue to be made available to schools.

School transport and Face coverings/mask wearing

With effect from Monday 28 February the wearing of face coverings/masks on school transport will no longer be mandatory but will continue to be advised. All other measures relating to hygiene (including the provision of hand sanitiser and additional cleaning of services) and pre-assigned seating will remain in place subject to further review.

Cleaning and Hygiene in schools

The Department of Education has provided additional funding to schools to support the enhanced cleaning required to minimise the risks of COVID-19. This funding will continue for this academic year and will be reviewed in advance of the start of the next school year.



Physical Distancing

- **Primary Schools**

Physical distancing has been implemented in primary schools mainly by structuring pupils and their teachers into class bubbles (i.e. a class grouping which stays apart from other classes as much as possible) and discrete groups or “Pods” within those class bubbles, to the extent that this was practical.

It is recognised that this has impacted on teaching and learning and the normal socialising and mixing between and within classes and year groups. As the general requirement for physical distancing in society no longer applies, schools are no longer required to maintain class pods and bubbles.

This will facilitate a return to team teaching, sports, singing and music, breakfast clubs and inter schools activities. Use of changing rooms, PE halls and lockers, staff rooms etc. can resume where there has been limited access in this regard.

Where schools implemented staggered drop offs or pickups or breaks, these are no longer necessary.

- **Post Primary Schools**

The suite of measures set out in the Framework for physical distancing at post primary schools included, reconfiguring class spaces to maximise physical distancing; reviewing timetables, use of live streaming within the school; and accessing available spaces within the local community.

As the general requirement for physical distancing in society no longer applies, schools are no longer required to maintain these arrangements. Where these arrangements are impacting negatively on teaching and learning such as live streaming or restricting team teaching etc. they should cease immediately. It is not envisaged that timetables would be rearranged mid-year.

Use of changing rooms, PE halls and lockers, staff rooms etc. can resume where there has been limited access in this regard.



Visitors to schools/Parent teacher meetings

There is no longer a requirement to restrict visitors to schools and schools should revert to the normal arrangements for visitors. In this context parent teacher meetings should resume and schools where parent teacher meetings have not taken place should commence these as soon as possible. All schools should ensure that they have a parent teacher meeting for each year group within this academic year (where these have not already taken place).

Return to Work Form/ return to schools form

Schools no longer need to request staff or pupils/students to complete a Return to Work form or a Return to School form after school holidays/breaks.

Antigen testing arrangements for children in primary schools and special classes and special schools)

As part of the transition arrangements the HSE will continue with the current processes to support the provision of antigen tests to primary schools, special schools and childcare settings.

The Antigen Free phone number is: 1800 110055 or parents may order antigen tests online via www.hse.ie/schooltest.

The call centre opening hours will be altered slightly and from next week onwards will be 8:45am to 6:00pm Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays). The online portal will remain operational 24/7 and will shortly be available through Irish as well as English.

Participation in antigen testing is voluntary, therefore it is not necessary for parents to share information with the school about whether they have requested antigen tests and nor to confirm negative antigen tests

Children who are well should continue to come to school whether they participate in antigen testing or not.

Public health risk assessment arrangements for special schools

Where a positive case occurs in a special school Public Health will undertake a public health risk assessment if the positive case was in the school setting during their infectious period.



Staffing flexibility arrangements

It is recognised that public health advice to remain at home if symptomatic or if testing positive for Covid-19 will result in a continued demand for substitutes and the need for some continuing flexibility in regard to leave arrangements. Separate guidance to schools will issue in respect of parental leave arrangements.

Banking of SET hours

Schools are asked to continue to make every effort to obtain a substitute for all teacher absences. Non-classroom teachers should only be used as a measure of last resort where it is not possible to secure a substitute teacher through any of the other sources.

In these circumstances the Department is permitting the banking of SET hours from January until the Easter break.

Temporary COVID-19 emergency substitution arrangements for Post Primary Schools

Information Note 0026/2021 advised schools that post primary teachers could provide up to a maximum of 35 additional teaching hours between 29th November 2021 and 28th February 2022. In order to continue to support schools to source substitution cover over the coming weeks, this provision is now being extended for a further period, and allows up to a maximum of a further 35 additional teaching hours, during the period between 1st March 2022 and 31st May 2022.

Queries should be directed to the Post Primary Payroll Section of Department of Education, Athlone via email PPPayroll@education.gov.ie or to the HR Department of their ETB if employed in an ETB school.

Helpline for schools

The Department of Education has a helpline to provide support to schools during Covid-19.

The email address of the helpline is as follows:

Covid19_alert@education.gov.ie.

This line had been operating 7 days per week since January 2022. The volume of calls has dropped significantly and therefore the operation of the helpline has been reviewed. The helpline will remain in place for the remainder of this school year and will operate from Monday - Friday 09.00 - 17.00.



Deirdre Shanley
Assistant Secretary
23 February 2022