

The use of reduced timetable/reduced day in schools

INTO comment on draft guidelines

22 October 2019





Introduction

The INTO supports the policy of inclusive education and has been to the fore in calling for support and resources for schools to enable them to meet the needs of all pupils. However, there are some children enrolled in our schools who have needs that are not currently being met due to insufficient support and/or inappropriate resources. In such circumstances, a shortened school day may be considered. In **all** cases of shortened school days, the INTO's position is that such an arrangement is designed to be temporary and is part of a process of inclusion or re-inclusion. The decision to implement a shortened school day/reduced timetable must always be taken with agreement from the pupil's parents. The provision of guidelines on the use of reduced timetables/reduced days is, therefore, welcome.

Draft guidelines

The purpose of the guidelines should be to clarify the context for reduced school days and to outline procedures and protocols to be followed when reduced days are deemed appropriate. **All students'** interests must be to the fore when devising the guidelines. While the INTO acknowledges the need for some record keeping, it is important that schools are not overburdened with unnecessary bureaucratic demands for recording and reporting.

Reasons for reduced days

Placing a pupil on a reduced school day should always be seen in the context of supporting the full inclusion/re-integration of the child. However, in some cases schools do not have access to the support or resources required by pupils. The right to education must be seen as the right of **all children** to education and the right to realise their potential. It is important that no pupils are disadvantaged in terms of their education when pupils with unmet needs are enrolled in school. The need for reduced school days could decline if schools were better supported to meet all needs of their pupils that impact on their learning.

Some children have medical needs that may warrant a shortened school day for a period of time, for example, where a child may be recovering from an illness or surgery. Some children may have developed school phobias or have suffered major trauma, which may impact on their ability to attend school for a full day. Schools do not have the resources required to cater for the needs of children with severe social and emotional needs, or pupils



who require intensive behavioural support, speech and language therapy or occupational therapy. There is an increasing number of pupils presenting with anxiety and mental health difficulties in schools and there are long waiting lists for the services of CAMHS. The services of CAMHS is not available in all parts of the country. Children with mental health, social, emotional and behavioural needs can struggle to adjust to a school routine and can find it difficult to relate to other children and adults. In the absence of appropriate therapeutic or counselling supports for pupils, being facilitated with a reduced day can lessen the pressure a full day in school might involve. While the objective must always be to build up to full day attendance, this will remain a challenge when appropriate supports and resources are lacking. As stated in the guidelines, there are some supports available to schools, such as some additional teachers and SNAs, however, NEPS is under-resourced and therapy services are not available beyond the current demonstration project. Counselling or support for pupils with mental health difficulties are not currently available in schools. Sensory or nurture rooms are only available in a small number of schools.

A reduced school day/week can be used very successfully as a behaviour management strategy and should not be ruled out where it is an appropriate response to pupils who struggle in school because of their behaviour.

Some Key Points

All references to TUSLA in the guidelines should state '*TUSLA Educational Welfare Services.*' References to TUSLA can lead to confusion among teachers and parents as this body is more often associated with social worker services.

Decisions to place pupils on shortened days are made by principals, class teachers and special education teachers based on their assessment of pupils' needs at the time the decision is being made. Information or evidence from other professionals, and from the pupils themselves or their parents, will also be taken into account in making decisions. Arrangements for shortened school days should be agreed with parents and pupils should also be consulted.

In order to reduce the administrative burden on principal teachers, it should be sufficient for schools to report to the EWS where pupils are on shortened days for more than a week in any one school year.



It is not clear what the rationale is for limiting reduced timetables/days to periods of six weeks. If a pupil's needs are not being addressed, reduced days may need to continue for a longer period or be carried over into the next academic year. Shortened school days at the beginning of the academic year should not be excluded. For some children who suffer from anxiety, a gradual start to the school year may be appropriate. The unique circumstances of children must be considered and allow for flexibility regarding a timeframe for re-inclusion (i.e. progressing at a pace that best suits the child and his/her individual needs). Continuous support to enable re-inclusion must be consistent to ensure the child does not regress.

At primary level the class teacher is the person with whom the pupils and the parent have a relationship. Schools cannot be expected to provide interventions for children if the supports required are of a therapeutic or a counselling nature. It is reasonable that class teachers give some guidance to parents and the pupils regarding work which could be completed at home, where this is suitable for the child.

It is unreasonable to expect schools to provide interventions when a child is not in school. Schools can support pupils when they are in schools and can provide interventions where they have the resources to do so. However, access to supports such as therapy or counselling are practically non-existent.

Section 4 on 'Key Requirements for the use of Reduced Timetables/Reduced Day' should be rephrased to reflect the fact that the document contains guidelines. The verb 'must' should be replaced by 'should' or 'it is recommended that' or 'it is advised that'.

The supports mentioned in Section 5 do not reflect the reality of the level of support available to schools.

Parental agreement/plans

The INTO has no difficulty with the proposal that the rationale for shortened school days should be clearly explained to parents of a child being placed on a reduced school day or that a short plan outlining steps being taken towards the full inclusion/re-inclusion of a child should be agreed with the parents. However, there is no need to devise a bureaucratic process around the arrangements which will only add to the workload of overburdened primary principals, without any benefit to the child.



The INTO is of the view that it is not necessary for such agreements to be shared with the Educational Welfare Service. It is normal practice that inspectors review processes and procedures in place in schools, and where pupils are placed on reduced days, this matter should be discussed with inspectors during routine visits. It should be a matter for the school, in collaboration with the parents concerned, to decide whether to extend reduced days for pupils beyond the initial timeframe decided. Many shortened school days are for periods shorter than a week, therefore there is no need for a bureaucratic process of reporting and seeking permission for extensions.

While the INTO supports the idea that each reduced timetable should be reviewed periodically at times agreed by the parents and the school, there is no need to formalise the process by insisting on fixed time limits and reporting to the EWS. Not all decisions to place pupils on shortened school days are taken in collaboration with other professionals, as schools do not have easy access to such professionals (e.g. psychologists). It should not be necessary, nor should it be a requirement, to involve other professionals as principals and teachers are well placed to make educational decisions about pupils' learning.

Parents can sometimes feel isolated and it is important that adequate support from agencies apart from the school is put in place to support them where the needs of their child are beyond what the school can support.

School work during reduced days

Where it is in the best interest of the pupil, class teachers may expect the child to complete some work at home related to their school work. Precisely how much work should be expected, if any, should be agreed with the parents, but should not place an onerous burden on class teachers or create additional stressors for the pupil concerned. Any work assigned to a pupil to complete outside of the school setting must be specifically tailored, be part of an overall plan for the child and not be a source of anxiety for the children (or parents and guardians).

The form

Any form to be completed by the school should be short and simple, but flexible. The current form does not reflect that shortened days can be flexible with time in school gradually increasing day by day, or week by week. Not all pupils are formally assessed as



having special educational needs. It is a matter for the school to decide what level of additional support is required to support children's learning based on the information available to them. Access to formal diagnoses of special educational needs is very limited.

Concluding comment

Education support services – educational welfare services, NEPS, CAMHS, NCSE – are under-resourced, leaving schools to address a range of challenges that impact on their pupils' learning and educational experiences. Placing pupils on shortened days is a response to needs – needs of the pupils placed on the shortened and the needs of other pupils in the school, in particular where there are questions of health and safety. There is a need for increased investment and additional resources to ensure that all schools can access the required supports in the pupil's time of need.

It is reasonable to expect that schools document incidences of reduced hours/days for pupils in terms of number of days for each pupil concerned. Schools should keep a record of processes followed and actions taken and this information, like all school records, can be viewed by inspectors during visits. However, the recording process should not be overly bureaucratic or burdensome. There is no clear definition of 'exceptional circumstances' and a fuller explanation would be useful.

The child's voice is an important element in devising an action plan, which is also agreed with parents/guardians and teachers, and with other professionals where they are involved.