



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling

For primary and post-primary schools

2 April 2020

Introduction

All schools are currently closed under Covid-19 restrictions. The guidance in this document from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) is being put in place as a contingency measure to support the continuity of teaching and learning in the event of an extension to public health measures and follows on from Circular Letter 0024/2020.

For all involved in education, this is a challenging period as we strive to support the learning and wellbeing of students while out of the school environment and where teaching and learning approaches have had to change. This is not an easy time for teachers, students and their families. It is particularly difficult for students who are homeless or marginalised, students with special educational needs, students whose families are experiencing stress and uncertainty, and students preparing for this year's state examinations.

This guidance aims to support schools to provide all of their students with an effective education programme, insofar as possible, in the current context. Many schools and teachers are making huge efforts to support students at home. The guidance draws from the experience of different types of schools that are actively engaging with their students using a range of approaches and resources¹. Additional guidance on other aspects of supporting students will issue in due course.

Key themes of this guidance:

- The role of schools in engaging with students
- Teachers and school leaders working together
- Keeping in touch with students – the importance of providing feedback and advice
- Helping students and teachers stay well
- Keeping in touch with parents and guardians
- Staying safe in the distance learning environment
- State examinations in the post-primary sector

¹ The guidance is informed by: a telephone survey conducted by the Department's Inspectorate; a primary survey conducted by Maynooth University on behalf of the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN); and a post-primary survey conducted by Education and Training Boards, Ireland (ETBI) on behalf of the post-primary management bodies.

The role of schools in engaging with students

Schools should maintain a sense of normality for students to ensure that they continue to progress in their learning, despite being outside the classroom. Daily routine for students, supported by schools using new ways of working with them, is particularly important. While this may pose a real challenge for teachers, principals, parents, guardians and students, it is critical to ensure that the momentum of learning is not lost.

In particular, it is important that every effort is made to ensure:

- Regular engagement of students in lessons, tasks and learning experiences across the range of curriculum areas or subjects
- Provision of specific and regular supports for students with special educational needs
- Provision of specific and customised supports for students at risk of educational disadvantage
- Provision of regular assignments to students that are purposeful, manageable and can be carried out independently
- Provision of regular, practical, supportive and customised feedback to students on the work submitted
- Adoption of a whole school approach to engagement with students to ensure consistency of approach so as not to overburden students or their parents and guardians

Engagement by students in learning opportunities and tasks will bring a sense of routine in their daily activities and contribute to their wellbeing at this difficult time while aiming for them to make progress in their learning. All schools and teachers, including teachers of students with special educational needs, should therefore be regularly communicating and engaging with students to ensure that there is continuity in their learning. Where possible, primary teachers should make every effort to engage with their students on a daily basis and post-primary teachers should do so on the days that they are normally timetabled for lessons with their students. In engaging with students, there should be a balance between the assignment of independent work, whether written or practical, online learning and other tasks in accordance with the learning needs of students and the resources available.

Here are some options for engaging with students currently used by schools:

- Engaging with parents and guardians and students by phone and email or by any means that the school sees as appropriate
- Assignment of independent work using email, school websites, online tools such as Padlet, Flipgrid, TED-Ed, apps such as Seesaw, Aladdin Connect and the school app

- Devising specific tasks based on televised learning opportunities such as the RTÉ Home School Hub, Cúla 4 on TG4 and various documentaries on television players such as RTÉ player
- Hosting school assemblies on local community radio and other meeting platforms
- Virtual lessons where students can attend remotely, using platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Webex and Google Classroom.

Special education teachers may send packages of supports to parents and guardians and engage with their students through e-mail, online video communication apps such as Skype and Seesaw and also through virtual learning environments.

Example 1: A two-teacher primary school in Connacht uses the Microsoft Teams platform each day to provide a one-hour session where students log on and the teachers provide brief lessons in literacy, numeracy and other areas of the curriculum. During this time, tasks are set and opportunities for the students to share what they have been working on are created. The students have the opportunity to speak with each other and the teacher during this time. These lessons are recorded and available online to support the students with their tasks and also for those who cannot access the 'live' lesson.

Example 2: A large mixed post-primary school in Munster is delivering its complete timetable online using Google Classroom. Teachers are hosting live classes where possible, or alternatively providing pre-recorded classes or assigned work that can be completed during the time that the class would usually take place. The range of approaches allows the different circumstances of the teachers to be taken into account.

Practical advice on using technology to support children's learning

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) has created a short one-hour course aimed at helping teachers to teach and support learning online. It covers how to get started, finding online resources, communicating with students and creating digital resources. This is available at the following link:

- [Teaching online for primary and post-primary teachers during school closures](#)

Further online and distance learning supports are available at the links below:

- [PDST – Online learning during school closures](#)
- [PDST – Distance Learning](#)

Scoilnet also provides access to a wide variety of resources and information developed by various services including: the PDST, Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the National Council for Special Education

(NCSE), the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) which offers a selection of resources to support Irish language learning. These resources can all be accessed at <https://www.scoilnet.ie/support/>

When selecting resources, teachers are urged to use their professional expertise to decide upon appropriate online resources that match the intended learning and the context of the students. To protect against overburdening parents, guardians and students, teachers should exercise caution in the assignment and recommendation of long lists of online links. Teachers should also be selective in their use of tools and environments in order to make best use of their time in engaging with their students. It should be noted that the DES does not endorse any particular external tools or resources.

Teachers and school leaders working together

Collegiality and collaboration among school leaders and staff will be critical in the days and weeks ahead as they arrive at agreed solutions to the challenges faced by the whole school community. This is particularly important to ensure the collective wellbeing and support for the additional efforts needed to sustain the implementation of appropriate programmes of learning for all students, especially the most vulnerable and those preparing for state examinations. School leaders will maintain oversight of teachers' work in facilitating continuity of provision for all students throughout the period of the new arrangements.

There should be regular meetings with teaching staff and communications between teachers to maintain staff relations, support each other and to plan and co-ordinate students' learning. Regular meetings will help to ensure consistency in terms of the school and teachers having reasonable expectations of students and their parents and guardians.

Here are some options for staff collaboration currently used by schools:

- Regular phone calls between staff members, emails, text messages and social media communication tools
- Staff meetings using online meeting facilities such as Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts and Webex or through phone conferencing
- Different groups of teachers in the school such as those teaching particular class levels, student support teams, leadership and management teams, special education teams and members of subject departments working together to plan work and share practice
- Teachers and school leaders collaborating and communicating with personnel outside of their own immediate school community to provide support and advice, and to share good practice with one another.

Example 3: A large primary school in Dublin is hosting online staff meetings using Google Classroom, including regular in-school management team meetings and collaborative team meetings between teachers who teach the same class grouping.

Example 4: A DEIS school in Munster is collaborating with other schools in its network and availing of assistance from its parent body to provide materials and resources in support of the Leaving Certificate Applied cohort in the school. A similar collaborative approach is being used to support all teachers in the school's network with technical training and advice.

Keeping in touch with students – the importance of providing feedback and advice

Teacher feedback to students is very important to ensure continuity and progression in learning, to affirm students' work and to ensure that students stay motivated and focused while working at home. In this regard, teachers should ensure that:

- They respond regularly to students with helpful feedback on the work that the students submit to them
- They are flexible and agree timelines for return of work with parents and students
- Their feedback is relevant and easily understood
- Their feedback informs the next stage of learning
- Their feedback is manageable for both teachers and students
- Their feedback is specific – there should not be an over-reliance on self-correcting tools or generic feedback.

Here are some options for giving feedback to students currently used by schools:

- Correction of students' work that has been created on word documents and pictures of work submitted via e-mail or other communication tools such as Seesaw
- Use of automated programmes or self-correcting tools such as TED-Ed, Kahoot and IXL which should complement and support direct teacher feedback on students' work
- Use of Microsoft Teams, Flipgrid or other tools to record video and audio feedback by the teacher which addresses strengths and areas for improvement, along with guidance to support this improvement.
- Use of online learning platforms that have video conferencing functions such as Google Classrooms and Microsoft Teams for sharing of completed tasks for feedback from teachers and peers

Example 5: A four-teacher primary school in Ulster is using the Seesaw app to communicate with parents, guardians and students. Students send examples of their work back to the teacher who corrects it and sends feedback. In another similar sized school, this feedback is being recorded using audio, and the students hear the teacher's comments when it is returned to them.

Example 6: A large post-primary school in Leinster is using Office 365 and Microsoft Teams extensively to assign and correct students' work. The school has adjusted its approach based on feedback from teachers as to what is working best and the principal emails staff with tips as they emerge. Teachers can see when students have viewed or completed the assigned work and can provide confidential feedback to each student.

It is also important to get feedback from students and their parents and guardians on how well the arrangements are working for them to inform ongoing activities being provided for the students.

Helping students and teachers stay well

Maintaining the wellbeing of students, supported by their families, is of the utmost importance at this exceptional time. Some students may be coping well with staying at home, social/physical distancing and completing school work at home whereas others may be struggling with these changes. There will be continuing challenges in the weeks ahead as students miss their friends, school and their extra-curricular and social activities. Schools and teachers will play an important role in supporting normality and routine for the students and in encouraging healthy behaviours.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has developed guidance and advice for schools, students and parents in relation to managing and staying well when schools are closed. This guidance, and further guidance that will follow, can be accessed at the following link:

- [NEPS – Advice and resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19](#)

The wellbeing of teachers is equally important as they navigate a challenging situation while trying to support their students. Teachers should engage with their colleagues and school management to ensure collegiate support during this time. It is essential that teachers develop strategies and access support as necessary to safeguard their own wellbeing. In this regard, teachers' attention should be brought to the Department's *Employee Assistance and Wellbeing Programme* where relevant. Details are available at the following link: [DES – Employee Assistance and Wellbeing Programme](#)

Keeping in touch with parents and guardians

This is a particularly challenging time for parents and guardians. Many will be worried for older or vulnerable family members and concerned about the fact that their children are missing so much school.

It is good for schools to:

- Be judicious about the amount of work sent home for students – too much can be as much a problem as too little
- Encourage parents and guardians to engage in non-formal learning activities where appropriate to the child such as reading with and to children and taking part in daily exercise
- Establish good channels of communication with parents and guardians and support them through agreed activities so as to avoid placing an excessive burden on them
- Advise parents and guardians of the online engagement scheduled between teachers and students and of the importance of supervising the use of online platforms by their children
- Work with parents and guardians to agree solutions in the face of challenges such as access to the necessary software or digital devices and adequate broadband.

Here are some options for communicating with parents and guardians currently used by schools:

- Regular updating of the school website
- Sending messages by text, email or any means that the school sees as appropriate
- Asking parents and guardians to download various online applications such as Class DoJo, Aladdin Connect, Studyladder or the school app to enable ease of communication between school and home
- Making phone or e-mail contact with parents and guardians just to check that students are engaged and to answer queries.

Example 5: In a primary Gaelscoil located in the midlands, teachers are using Google Classroom, Padlet, Seesaw, Blogs and emails to communicate with pupils as well as using Aladdin Connect to facilitate reciprocal communication with pupils and their families.

Example 6: A post-primary school in Munster is using their website to direct parents towards a simple training in the use of Google Classroom so they can support their children in the use of the platform which the school has previously used on a regular basis. If students do not engage, these families are contacted and further support is offered.

Staying safe in the distance learning environment

It is important that teachers maintain the safe and ethical use of the internet during distance learning and assist parents and guardians to be aware of their role also. There are helpful resources available at <https://www.webwise.ie/> to support teachers, parents and students. Schools should also ensure that their Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) informs and guides remote or distance learning activity.

Principals and teachers should keep personal data safe when working from home and follow the data protection policy around the use of email in their school. Teachers should only use the school's trusted networks or cloud services and comply with any rules and procedures about cloud or network access, login details and data sharing. All locally-stored data should be adequately backed up in a secure manner. Useful information and guidance in this regard is available at this link: [Data Protection Schools](#)

Schools and teachers should continue to be alert to the possibility that a child protection concern may arise in relation to students they come in contact with and should follow the relevant reporting procedures in the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017. In circumstances where it is not possible to jointly report a concern with the school Designated Liaison Person (DLP), the teacher should make their own report directly to Tusla and provide a copy of that report to the school DLP at the earliest opportunity. Details are available on the Tusla website at <https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/contact-a-social-worker3/> or through the Tusla online portal at <https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/web-portal/>

In cases of emergency, where a child appears to be at immediate and serious risk, and it is not possible to make contact with Tusla, An Garda Síochána shall be contacted immediately. This may be done by contacting a Garda Station.

State examinations in the post-primary sector

Further guidance will issue in the coming weeks from the State Examinations Commission based on advice from health officials. However, it is critical that teachers continue to prepare their students for the state examinations, using the most effective tools and resources available to them, in line with guidance already provided. The DES acknowledges that the uncertainty involved is challenging for teachers, students and their parents and guardians. Every effort is being made at all levels to assist these students to continue to progress and be in a state of readiness for the examinations. Information regarding the examinations will be updated and available at <https://www.examinations.ie/>