

06 January, 2021 - Ministers Foley and Madigan provide further detail of in-school and remote learning provision during the periods of school closure

- Schools will be closed until 1 February 2021
- Special schools, special classes and specialised settings will be fully open from Monday 11 January
- Leaving Certificate final year students will receive in-school teaching provision for 3 days each week, all other students to be supported to learn remotely. Guidance services and supports will be available to all students.
- Essential school building projects to continue

In order to support the suppression of the Covid-19 virus in the community, government has today decided that schools will be closed to students for a period of three weeks, with certain exceptions, and will reopen on 1 February. Minister for Education Norma Foley TD and Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion Josepha Madigan TD provided further detail on the arrangements that will be in place to support students' learning during this time.

Schools will put in place remote provisions from Monday 11 January for all other students, in accordance with their contingency plans for remote learning, which will be communicated directly to families by schools.

From Monday 11 January, students who attend special schools, special classes at primary and post-primary and specialised settings (such as high support special care schools and youth encounter projects) will attend school in person.

From Monday 11 January, Leaving Certificate final year students will attend school three days per week, with the other two days' learning being supported by their teachers remotely. Schools will have the autonomy to decide what works best within those parameters; for example, which days students will attend in person.

Minister Foley said: "School communities have worked incredibly hard to operate safely under Covid-19. The Government has always been guided by public health advice in relation to what is safe in schools. NPHET remain of the view that schools are low risk environments but that there is a need to reduce activity and movement to curb the spread of the virus. As such a full reopening involving more than 1 million people is not advisable but more limited provision is acceptable.

"While this is not an ideal situation, schools have worked extremely hard over the last few months to put in place remote teaching and learning plans for this contingency, based on guidance provided by my Department and agreed with the education partners. This guidance includes best practice on age and stage appropriate resources and supports and schools have been advised to develop their own plans, based on this guidance, to support students' learning in this period.

"There has been a huge increase in the ability and skill level in this area, with enormous take-up by teachers and school leaders of the training and resources offered by my Department and its agencies. In addition, significant additional resources have been provided to schools to help support the provision of ICT equipment and to prioritise the needs of students that do not otherwise have access to ICT. I would like to thank everyone for their work in this area and ongoing commitment to supporting the student body with remote learning, via ICT where possible and using other methods where not.

"I acknowledge fully that this will be challenging for pupils, teachers and other school staff and parents, and I urge everyone to keep a strong focus on wellbeing and self-care during this time. There is a wealth of wellbeing support and advice available from the National Educational Psychological Service and this will be promoted through schools and directly to parents also.

“I am pleased that it is possible to maintain in person education for pupils of special schools and special classes, and I thank everyone involved in ensuring that the needs of this group of children are met.

“There will also be a strong element of in-person teaching for approximately 61,000 students in this year’s Leaving Certificate class. This is extremely important as they prepare for their examinations, and I will continue to work with the advisory group of students, parents and education partners in planning to support this cohort of students.

“Guidance services will continue to be available to all students, in the manner deemed most appropriate by each school, which is important at this crucial time for students in making choices about their future and in having access to wellbeing supports.

“The majority of schools that avail of the school meals programme put arrangements in place to ensure that pupils had continued access to school meals during the previous school closure period. My Department will work closely with the Department of Social Protection to ensure the continuation of the school meals programme during this period also.

“The wellbeing of the whole school community is vital, and the Department will continue to promote its wellbeing supports and guidance to schools and directly to parents and students over the coming weeks. Along with my colleagues in Government, I urge everyone to continue to follow the public health advice, to minimise contacts and to do our bit to reduce the spread of the virus, so we can return to in-person learning for all as soon as possible.”

As a contingency measure for the possibility of partial or full school closures, in recent months the Department of Education provided to schools a suite of guidance materials, agreed with the education partners, to enable schools to mediate the curriculum safely for all pupils/students in a COVID-19 context. Those guidance materials were issued to schools and centres for education as they were published and are available at gov.ie. These documents have been complemented by [Circular 0074/2020](#) which required all schools to put in place appropriate contingency measures to ensure that they are prepared to continue to support teaching and learning in the event of a partial or full closure of schools arising from Public Health advice.

The Department of Education continues to engage with Public Health in the HSE who are fully committed to supporting schools. Schools teams that have been put in place to support schools since October will continue to support schools as before during this phase of limited opening. Public health has confirmed that close contact testing will continue for schools.

The public health approach to managing Covid-19 in schools will continue as before. The Department will continue to support those public health teams through increased deployment of staff to enhance those teams.

All provision within schools will continue according to public health advice developed for educational settings and the Department will continue to fund and support as necessary all infection prevention and control measures in schools to ensure the safety of the school community.

Special education provision during closure

124 special schools and 1,836 special classes in 964 schools serving approximately two per cent of the school population – 18,552 children with complex special needs – will re-open following the extended Christmas break on Monday 11 January.

Minister Madigan said: “The spread of Covid-19 over recent weeks has made it necessary to put in place exceptional measures so that our education system can continue to serve our students while also ensuring we protect public health. Following advice from NPHET and the Chief Medical Officer, we are taking action in the interests of students and school staff. While medical evidence demonstrates that our schools are safe, it is vital that people be given the

fullest opportunity to restrict their movements and avoid travelling outside the home unless absolutely necessary.

“As Minister for Special Education and Inclusion, I am fully aware of the impact that previous school closures have had on our most vulnerable students, particularly those with additional needs. It is for this reason that I have sought to maintain specific provision for special education at this time, including ensuring that special schools and special classes can remain open. It is clear that a one-size-fits-all approach to education provision during this pandemic will not benefit every student. I do not want to see the educational progress of students in special schools and special classes negatively impacted at this time. We know how much of a difference this daily school structure and support makes in their lives and I will continue to ensure that they receive this necessary support over the coming weeks.

"I am pleased that there is a commitment to continue dedicated provision for students with special educational needs in mainstream education and I am grateful to all the teachers in this regard for their work and engagement. Guidance on special education has been issued to mainstream schools and this will be continuously monitored.

“I want to reiterate my gratitude to all school staff, including special needs assistants and special education teachers, as well as families for their dedication and commitment to students and our education system. I welcome the continued financial and logistical supports that are being provided to schools, including special schools. Our school communities are diverse, and it is vital that this diversity of need is recognised in how we deliver education. I will continue to advocate for the special education sector and for the maintenance of inclusive school communities in the days and weeks ahead. With the support and cooperation of all partners in education, families, and students, I know we can prevail.”

The Department of Education has put in place a range of supports for schools, which will continue during this period. Funding for PPE has been provided to all schools. The enhanced arrangements for substitution and replacement will continue to apply. Enhanced school teams have been put in place with additional resources from the Department of Education’s Inspectorate to support the public health school teams.

The advisory supports by the Department of Education Inspectorate will continue to support schools during this period. The Guidance and support on wellbeing from the National Educational Psychological services will be promoted to schools during this period.

School transport services will continue to be available for all eligible students who are attending school over this period.

School buildings will be open to allow for staff to facilitate distance learning. Teachers, SNAs and other school staff are allowed to travel to school as essential workers.

Schools will be asked to make arrangements to facilitate the collection of books by students and parents in a safe manner as soon as possible.

Schools’ guidance services and supports will continue to be available to students during this period and can be made available in the manner deemed appropriate by the school.

In line with the underlying rationale of the further public health measures announced, school authorities should not undertake any non-essential maintenance/construction works at this time (including those which may have been envisaged under minor works grant funding).

The Department of Education confirms that school building projects providing essential additional capacity or involving essential maintenance/refurbishment works are regarded as “essential construction” and may therefore continue in line with the Government decision.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

Remote Learning Contingency Planning

As a contingency measure for the possibility of partial or full school closures, in recent months the Department of Education provided to schools a suite of guidance materials, agreed with the education partners, to enable schools to mediate the curriculum safely for all pupils/students in a COVID-19 context. Those guidance materials were issued to schools and centres for education as they were published and are available at gov.ie and at the links below.

[Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19: Context: September –December 2020 For primary schools and special schools](#)

- [Guidance on Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning in a COVID-19 Context For post-primary schools and centres for education.](#)

These documents have been complemented by [Circular 0074/2020](#) which required all schools to put in place appropriate contingency measures to ensure that they are prepared to continue to support teaching and learning in the event of a partial or full closure of schools arising from Public Health advice.

The guidance notes as follows:

It is crucially important that the learning of all pupils/students, especially those with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage and/or early school leaving, are supported at this time. For that reason, the following requirements in relation to remote teaching and learning of all pupils/students are particularly important:

- **Regular engagement with pupils/students:** It is important that teachers engage with their pupils/students; in a primary setting this should, ideally, be on a daily basis; in a post-primary context teachers should, as far as possible, engage with students as per the normal school timetable.
- **A blend of guided and independent learning tasks/experiences:** Teacher-pupil/student engagement should involve both direct teaching by the teacher and the assignment of independent learning tasks for completion by the pupils/students.
- **Appropriate and engaging learning opportunities:** Teachers should ensure that the chosen learning tasks give pupils/students an opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a clear and concise way.
- **Learning tasks:** The tasks chosen should be specifically aligned to the needs of the pupil/student, including pupils/students with special educational needs (SEN), and should enable the teacher to monitor progress and give constructive, developmental feedback to support the next stages in their learning.
- **Two-way feedback between home and school:** Schools should ensure that two-way feedback between teachers and parents/guardians and between teachers and their pupils/students is encouraged and supported. Schools should provide manageable and accessible opportunities for all pupils/ students to regularly share samples of their work with the teacher(s) throughout each week. Teachers should ensure that work received is corrected and relevant feedback is provided.
- **Support for pupils/students with SEN:** Special education teachers (SETs) should continue to engage with the pupils/students on their caseloads and class/subject teachers should differentiate teaching and learning in line with their pupils'/students' needs to minimise disruption to their learning and progression.