

Department of Education and Science Primary Branch

To Boards of Management and Principals of National Schools

Time in School

1 THE WHITE PAPER

The White Paper on Education “[Charting Our Education Future](#)” notes that research findings indicate that the amount of time that students spend in organised learning activities has a critical bearing on their academic performance and all-round development.

The White Paper also notes the concern expressed by the *Primary Education Review Body* in relation to ensuring that students' entitlement to the minimum number of teaching days was guaranteed and, to that end, it confirms as a policy objective that the integrity of the school year and the school day will be preserved. In accordance with the commitment outlined in the White Paper, the Minister is now issuing this Circular.

In the longer term, school authorities will be obliged by statute to ensure that schools adhere to the prescribed minimum number of teaching days per annum and to the minimum number of teaching hours per day. In the meantime, the policy approach, summarised below and detailed in subsequent paragraphs, will be implemented with effect from the 1995/96 school-year.

2. THE SCHOOL YEAR

The minimum number of teaching days per school year will be 183 full school days (see below). It is stressed that this is a minimum number which must be adhered to by all schools (and all classes within a school). In no sense should this number be regarded as a maximum for any school. The school year typically breaks down as set out below.

School in operation for teaching		183
<i>Standard number of closings:</i>		
Saturdays and Sundays	104	
Permitted vacation days	56	
Public and religious holidays	<u>16</u>	
	176	176
Remaining days		<u>6</u>
		365

- The maximum period for which a national school may be closed for vacation in any school year is 56 days. All schools must close for Summer vacation for the complete months of July and August. The choice of the remainder of the vacation days on which a school will be closed is a matter for the Board of Management.
- The school may be closed on public holidays. Closure on religious holidays and also on special days not occurring during school vacation is at the discretion of the Board of Management, subject to meeting the requirement of 183 teaching days per year.

3. THE SCHOOL DAY

A full school day comprises a period of not less than five hours and forty minutes. The school day typically breaks down as set out in the following model.

	Hours	Minutes
Assembly, supervision, preparation etc		20
Roll call		10
Secular instruction	4	10
Religious instruction		30
Recreational interval		30
Total	5	40

Under the Rules for National Schools, forenoon and afternoon breaks of five minutes each are allowed. Where a recreation interval or breaks of a longer duration than the foregoing are taken (for example when children are allowed to have lunch in the classroom prior to the official commencement of the recreation interval) the length of the school day must be extended correspondingly.

If a school completes less than two hours and fifty minutes in any day of operation, such period may not be registered as part of the 183 days minimum for pupil teaching.

Any day on which the pupils complete two hours and fifty minutes but less than five hours and forty minutes will be regarded as a half school day and may be registered only as a half day for purposes of compliance with the minimum school year requirement.

Special Provisions for Infants and First Class

Schools are permitted to reduce the school day by one hour for children in infants and first class and the time required for a half attendance may be reduced by one half hour. The decision to apply this concession rests with the Board of Management. Such decisions should be dictated by the educational interests of the children.

The Minister notes with concern that there appears to be an increasing practice of sending junior infants home early from school for a prolonged period at the commencement of the school year. The Minister considers that such a relaxation of the Rules beyond the first two weeks cannot be justified. Use of this practice for a period in excess of two weeks will be regarded as a breach of the Rules.

The special provisions for infant or first class children do not exempt any teacher from attendance for the full period.

4. EXCEPTIONAL CLOSURES

General Position

School authorities retain discretion in relation to the need for and duration of exceptional closures. In general, a school closure, due to unforeseen circumstances, should be compensated for later in the school year. In exceptional circumstances, the Department may, on application by the school, exempt or partially exempt it from this requirement. Such exemption would be considered where, for instance, the period of absence of pupils was utilised by the school staff for essential school activities other than teaching.

Building/Maintenance

School authorities are reminded that every effort must be made to have works of maintenance, building etc. carried out during vacation periods.

Adverse Weather

Subject to the requirement outlined above it is for school authorities alone to determine whether it is necessary to close due to adverse weather.

Elections

In the case of schools used as polling stations, closure on polling day alone will be reckoned as part of the minimum number of days.

5. COMPLIANCE WITH THE REQUIREMENTS OF THIS CIRCULAR

It is the responsibility of the Board of Management to ensure that the terms of this Circular are complied with in full. Through the Chairperson, the Board is required to certify, on a monthly return form to the Department, that the Rules are being complied with fully.

For the purposes of monitoring compliance it will be necessary also that a Certificate be completed and signed by the School Principal and countersigned by the Chairperson of the Board of Management. This Certificate must be submitted to the Department on an annual basis.

Roll books must be open for inspection by the Department as part of the process of ensuring compliance with the requirements of this Circular.

Compliance with the Department's requirements on the length of the school day and the school year are basic conditions under which grants are paid to schools. Grants may be reduced if these conditions are not met.

As an alternative to a reduction in grants, the Minister may choose to reduce the number of vacation days as a sanction where the required minimum has not been achieved or to require that days lost be worked in the following school year.

Incorrect certification of school returns to the Department by the Chairperson of the Board of Management would in itself be a breach of the Rules. The Minister may withdraw recognition from a Board of Management for failure to observe the Rules.

6. GOOD PRACTICE BY BOARDS

A Board of Management should assess critically each proposal for closure of its school on days not occurring during the school vacation, in order to determine whether closure of the school is in the best interest of the children.

In order to guarantee that its school is in operation for, the prescribed minimum number of days, a Board, in planning the school year, should make allowance for days on which the school may have to be closed due to unforeseen or exceptional circumstances. The Department will only abate the minimum requirement of 183 days where the Board can satisfy it that the circumstances that warranted additional closures were entirely exceptional and that, as a consequence, it would not have been possible to achieve the required minimum over the remaining days of the school year.

A Board of Management should bear in mind that events which might require the exceptional closure of a school to pupils (e.g adverse weather) may not necessarily justify the non-attendance of teaching staff. Boards of Management should, therefore, ensure that the School Plan incorporates a strategy for the use of such days by the teaching staff for essential school activities other than teaching.

7. PROVIDING INFORMATION TO PARENTS

Each managerial authority should give parents, at the beginning of each year, a calendar of events in the school, including details of the length of school year and closures. It should of course be made clear that the calendar could be subject to change in the event of a closure for an exceptional cause, but that, as a general rule any unforeseen closure would be compensated for later in the school year.

It is suggested that school managers could usefully engage in discussion locally with parents concerning the practical arrangements which will apply when closures occur at short notice.

The Minister proposes to publish from time to time details of the annual period of operation of schools.

School authorities are requested to provide a copy of this Circular to the parents' and teachers' representatives on the Board of Management and to the parents' association/ National Parents' Council Representatives or other appropriate representatives of the parents/teachers for transmission to individual parents and teachers.

8. POSITION OF 6 "REMAIMNING DAYS"

It is intended that the 6 "Remaining Days" will be used for certain school related activities, such as parent/teacher meetings and school/curricular planning.

This matter will be the subject of an agreed Circular following the forthcoming negotiations to be held in the context of the Programme for Competitiveness and Work. Pending the outcome of these negotiations schools may continue to conduct these activities within the 183 days specified in the Circular provided that:

- I. the time spent on these activities accords with that specified in paragraph 3 in relation to the length of a full day and a half day, and
- II. the Board of Management and Principal certify the time spent on these activities.

Don Thornhill
Secretary