



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting pupils at risk of educational disadvantage

For primary schools

22 April 2020

Introduction

This guidance from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) advises on how schools and teachers can support continuity in the learning of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage during the school closures associated with Covid-19¹. The guidance builds on the key messages in [Guidance on Continuity of Schooling for Primary and Post-Primary Schools](#) published by the Department on 2 April 2020.

Pupils in a range of education settings may be at risk of educational disadvantage. Contexts that can give rise to this risk include socio-economic disadvantage, being a Traveller or a member of the Roma and migrant communities, or accommodation arrangements, including homelessness or residing in a direct provision setting. This guidance takes account of the fact that schools and other education settings have various resources and supports available to them to assist them in meeting the needs of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage. These range from care teams and in-school management teams to the services of the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and other agencies. Further, schools in the DEIS programme have additional resources to assist them in supporting such learners.

The need for pupils at risk of educational disadvantage to have regular, ongoing schooling is particularly important. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, learners at risk of educational disadvantage need even more support at this time. Many schools have introduced a range of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of these pupils are catered for, including pupils who have limited access to technology or whose parents are not in a position to support their learning. Examples of those strategies are included in this guidance note. The Department thanks the schools and teachers involved for sharing their practice. The Department also acknowledges the advice provided by a broad range of stakeholders in the preparation of the guidance.

¹ The document will be updated as necessary to take account of future circumstances regarding school closures which may arise.

Key themes of this guidance

- Teachers and school leaders working to support pupils at risk of educational disadvantage
- The role of teachers in engaging with pupils in learning
- Keeping in touch with parents and guardians
- Staying safe in the distance learning environment
- Resources for teachers

Teachers and school leaders working to support pupils at risk of educational disadvantage

In the current context, schools and teachers have to consider teaching and learning from a different perspective. Pupils' routines and support mechanisms have been impacted significantly and, in some instances, home circumstances may be challenging in terms of continuity in the pupils' learning. To the extent that is possible, schools should take account of these circumstances in planning programmes of work.

Members of the school community play a key role in ensuring that there is continuity of learning for all learners, but most especially for learners at risk of educational disadvantage:

- Boards of managements should work to ensure that the school provides for continuity of schooling for all pupils and that school leaders have taken the steps necessary to identify pupils who are at risk of not progressing their education
- Boards should also support their school leadership teams in working to engage these pupils by using the extent of the school's resources and by putting in place and monitoring appropriate strategies and interventions
- The school leadership team, comprising the principal and those in management or coordination roles should:
 - Maintain oversight of the continuity of learning for all pupils by engaging regularly with teachers
 - Ensure that the school's resources are targeted at those most in need through existing care and management structures
 - Promote a positive solution-oriented approach that will support all pupils to achieve, to learn and to progress in their education
 - Use all available information to work towards minimizing any further educational inequality among those at risk of educational disadvantage

- Use information relating to pupils' levels of engagement from no engagement, to partial and full engagement to inform the identification and planning of strategies to re-engage pupils.

Schools should consider using all available supports, both in-school and community based, to engage with pupils. Key amongst these are those supports provided by Tusla Education Support Services (TESS). These comprise supports provided under the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme and the School Completion Programme (SCP), in schools where they exist; and also the statutory service of Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs). EWO's are in place nationwide and play a pivotal role in engaging with schools in supporting the educational welfare of pupils.

In some instances, pupils may not have responded to the school's efforts to engage with them. In these cases, schools should identify and agree who within the school staff is best placed to make contact with the parents and guardians, with a view, in turn, to making contact with the pupil. Once contact has been established, its frequency will depend on the identified needs of the pupils concerned; in some cases, for example, it will be daily. However, contact should be supportive in nature and affirming of pupils' efforts to date.

In most instances, schools have successfully provided for continuity of learning for their pupils, including those at risk of educational disadvantage. However, a small number of schools have faced particular challenges in engaging with some of these pupils. In these circumstances, and where a school has exhausted all means of making contact with the pupil, the school should engage with TESS Educational Welfare Officers who will assist in establishing contact with the pupil.

Here are some strategies that schools can use to engage with pupils at risk of educational disadvantage and their parents and guardians:

- Frequent contact between the school and the pupil; in some instances, this should be daily
- Use existing pupil support and care structures to identify the barriers for those pupils who are most at risk or who may have disengaged
- Engage with parents, guardians and pupils and let them know how to contact key members of the staff
- Identify an adult in the school community, who has or had in the past, a positive working relationship with a disconnected pupil, in order to make contact
- Reassure pupils that any contact from them will be received positively and support will be offered
- Praise pupils frequently for engaging with the school and continue any rewards system that is in place
- Prioritise pupils based on a continuum of support model where supports are categorised as available **for all**, **for some** and **for a few**.

Additionally, schools in the DEIS programme should seek to:

- Draw on the existing relationships that the HSCL Coordinators and School Completion Programme (SCP) personnel have established with pupils and families
- Continue SCP interventions, including mentoring for pupils, where possible and practicable or adjust interventions that pupils availed of prior to school closures
- Engage with TESS personnel to continue to proactively engage with all pupils at risk and their families during these challenging times.

Here are some practical measures that schools have put in place to assist pupils at risk of educational disadvantage:

- *Post information packs to pupils who are experiencing difficulties connecting remotely*
- *Put out a call at local level to community services for extra digital devices that may no longer be in use to be redistributed*
- *Loan school digital devices to pupils*
- *Survey pupils to establish what is working well for them*
- *Send a communication to the parents and guardians of the pupil by mail, inviting them to encourage their child to check in with the school and provide them with a stamped school addressed envelope to post back to the school to let them know how they are getting on*
- *Link with local community and youth groups to support some pupils in the community*
- *Provide pupils with tables and chairs to do schoolwork where needed.*

The role of teachers in engaging with pupils in learning

Most of the strategies outlined in this guidance are intended to be used by primary schools. Many may also be suitable for use in other settings where primary school-aged children are to be found, including Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs) and schools attached to Special Care Units (SCUs). Teachers at the different levels will take account of their pupils' ages and abilities in devising programmes of learning. For example, teachers of younger pupils should encourage them to the extent that it is possible to participate in structured and unstructured play activities in the home environment. Teachers of older pupils should encourage them similarly but should also focus on the development of their literacy and numeracy skills as outlined later in this guidance.

Here are some strategies that teachers can use to support their pupils' learning:

- Adapt approaches to ensure that for those pupils who do not have digital access, their ability to participate in learning is not compromised
- Daily contact with those most at risk of educational disadvantage
- Devise tasks so that all pupils can achieve some success

- Scaffold work and provide manageable components so as to maximise completion rates and not overwhelm pupils
- Tap into the knowledge of individual pupil's interests to devise pupil-centred learning tasks accordingly
- Provide pupils with a choice of activities and invite them to present their work in a flexible manner
- Adopt a flexible approach when designing activities, so that learning can take place using the pupils' own physical surroundings
- Invite the pupils to submit work on a completely open task which the pupil identifies for him/herself

In addition to the strategies listed above, here are some practical ways that teachers have used to engage with pupils:

- *Post work and materials to pupils who are not able to engage digitally*
- *Post videos/audio of lessons and learning materials on the school website*
- *Devise simple recipes with everyday ingredients and post these on the school website with a video demonstration*
- *Post a video demonstration of physical exercise routines that pupils could do at home.*
- *Set up systems so that groups of learners can work together, either by phone or internet.*

Focusing on pupils' literacy and numeracy skills

In ensuring continuity of learning for pupils at risk of educational disadvantage, it is important that schools continue to provide opportunities for those pupils to develop their literacy and numeracy skills. In that regard, schools can continue to avail of the services of support personnel in the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) as well as the support of psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). Contact details for these, and other organisations, are to be found in the appendices.

Here are some measures that schools have put in place to develop literacy skills:

- *Arrange competitions for pupils to write a short story using a small set of random words*
- *Invite pupils to submit a book or film review and award a prize*
- *Offer loans of books from the school library*
- *Send supportive texts to parents and guardians at appropriate intervals to remind them to read with their child or encourage their child to read and send congratulatory texts when tasks were completed*
- *Encourage parents, guardians and pupils to join Libraries Ireland (see Appendix 1 for details)*
- *Connect pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) of the same language group to work together on tasks and connect pupils with EAL of different languages to teach each other one new word a day in their home language*
- *Ask pupils with EAL to watch the news in their own language and provide a summary in English.*

Here are some practical measures that schools have put in place to develop numeracy skills:

- *In subjects where numeracy plays a key role, teachers:*
 - *include questions that involve some element of problem solving in tasks or assignments*
 - *include questions that allow different approaches to addressing any problems posed and presenting their solutions*
 - *assign work that requires that pupils draw conclusions and explain their reasoning*
- *Post Numeracy “Problems of the Week” on the school’s website for the various class groups and award prizes*
- *Send frequent texts to parents and guardians to remind them to encourage their child to engage with the numeracy resources on Scoilnet.*

Keeping in touch with parents and guardians

Schools should continue to engage effectively and continuously with parents and guardians as a means of supporting them to support their children. Schools are advised to ensure that:

- Effective systems are in place to identify parents and guardians most in need of support
- Communication from the school is frequent, daily where necessary, clear and written in accessible language
- Parents and guardians are provided with contact numbers or emails to assist them in contacting the school

- Efforts are made to link in with local community support agencies including Youth Services to assist with the translation of communication with parents and guardians of children with EAL needs
- Feedback is sought from parents and guardians regarding what is working well and suggestions for improvement
- Information of a general nature is updated on the school website.

Here are some practical strategies that schools have implemented to ensure effective communications between the school and the parents and guardians of learners at risk of educational disadvantage:

- *Use the normal systems of communication via school website, text, email, Aladdin Connect*
- *Print a dedicated parent and guardian newsletter to provide advice and an update on how the school is providing continuity of learning*
- *Place an article in a local community newspaper outlining how the school is supporting pupils and providing contact details encouraging parents and guardians to get in touch*
- *Be interviewed on local radio to reiterate support and to encourage parents and guardians to contact the school*
- *Develop a dedicated social media communication platform for parents and guardians*
- *Provide the link to the Covid-19 advice in different languages on the school website*
- *Reach out to parents and guardians with EAL to support them in their understanding of any school communication.*

The role of the HSCL teacher in DEIS schools in linking with parents and guardians of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage is critical. The HSCL should ascertain how parents and guardians and their children are adjusting to new ways of learning and advise parents and guardians on how best to support their child. The importance of regular phone calls and contact by the HSCL cannot be overstated.

Schools should continue to use their existing programmes to support pupils' upcoming transitions to post-primary schools. Where schools have the services of the SCP, this should be availed of to support identified pupils who may require additional support. It is very important that communication is sent to parents and guardians and pupils to assure them that, as much support and information as possible around the next stage of education will be made available to them. This will help reduce anxiety among pupils and parents and guardians. Schools should liaise with EWOs in cases where pupils have not been offered a place in a post-primary school for September 2020.

Staying safe in the distance learning environment

Staying safe in the distance learning environment is critically important for schools, teachers, parents and guardians, and pupils. For guidance on this issue, please refer to the Department's *Guidance on Continuity for Schooling for Primary and Post-Primary*

Schools document (p.9) which was published on 2 April 2020. This provides advice on the safe and ethical use of the internet during distance learning and on keeping personal data safe when working from home. Schools should particularly ensure that their Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) informs and guides remote or distance learning activity and engagement in all its forms.

You will also find guidance on supporting pupil wellbeing in that document (p. 7).

Resources

A list of useful resources is provided in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 to support the work of schools in continuing to engage with pupils at risk of educational disadvantage. These resources relate to teaching and learning and to promoting positive health and wellbeing, and transitions. The list is not exhaustive, so schools are encouraged to draw on as many additional sources of information as possible to address the needs of their pupils and particular context. Seeking solutions to the current challenges provides a significant opportunity for schools to access information from the websites of their patron bodies, the managerial bodies, all relevant professional and teaching bodies, and to learn from each other. It should be noted that the DES does not endorse any particular external tools or resources.

Appendix 1: School Resources

Information issued by the DES on home tuition through distance learning for the duration of the pandemic can be accessed [here](#).

National Council for Special Education resources

- The [NCSE website](#) outlines a wide range of resources suitable for children with special educational needs. The site has a new dedicated resource section to support home learning during this time that includes [Online Resources for Teachers](#), [Online Resources for Parents](#) and [Useful apps](#) for home use. There are also links to many useful educational websites to direct parents, guardians and teachers towards further online supports.
- NCSE's network of advisors also remain available via NCSE's online application form to provide support and advice by telephone and email to schools and teachers of pupils with SEN. The form is available [here](#).

Professional Development Service for Teachers resources

- The PDST provides a range of resources relating to provision for pupils at risk of educational disadvantage including literacy resources targeted at DEIS and EAL, and mathematics programmes targeted at DEIS. These can be accessed at the following links:
 - [PDST- Literacy at home](#)
 - [PDST- Maths Recovery](#)
 - [PDST- Ready Set Go Maths](#)
- The PDST's online libraries section provides teachers with a range of online libraries to source and share both English and Irish texts across a variety of levels at [PDST- Distance learning- Digital libraries](#).
- The PDST also provides resources for primary EAL support and suggested websites to support EAL at [PDST – EAL \(Primary\)](#).

Distance learning resources

- The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) website page on [distance learning](#) provides support to teachers to engage with learners remotely. Supports include an online teaching course, information about platforms, distance learning supports for Health and Wellbeing and distance learning supports for Literacy.
- The [Scoilnet](#) website identifies resources for distance learning and home access. It provides links to the Department's support services that are relevant to the school closures.

- The [Webwise](#) website offers a range of resources to help teachers integrate internet safety into teaching and learning. It also provides advice for parents, guardians and children.
- NEPS has provided resources on literacy, transition planning etc. in the Guidelines, Tips and Handouts for Parents and Teacher section of its [Resources and Publications](#) webpage.

Publishers' resources

- [Folens](#) is offering free access to all of its eBooks and resources.
- [CJ Fallon](#) is offering free access to all of its online textbooks.
- The [Educational Company of Ireland](#) is offering free access to all of its eBooks and digital resources.

Online reading resources

- All pupils in the Republic of Ireland have open and free home access to a collection of all eBooks from World Book Online at [Scoilnet- World Book](#) .
- Britannica is offering free access to its Science and Humanities LaunchPacks to all [Scoilnet](#) users during the school closure period.
- [Children's Books Ireland](#) provides access to reading materials, guides and lists.
- [Libraries Ireland](#), the national library system, is providing free online access to eBooks, audiobooks, online magazines and newspapers.
- [Amazon](#) is giving free access to books and audio stories available.

Television resources

- The RTE Homeschool Hub, a teaching initiative for primary school children covering elements of the primary school curriculum, can be accessed at [RTE Learn](#).
- Cúla 4 ar Scoil, a school program through Irish for primary school children covering elements of the primary curriculum can be accessed at [TG4 Cúla 4](#). TG4 Cúla 4 provides a range of daily programmes and competitions.
- [World news](#) in many languages from the BBC is a useful resource for EAL pupils.

General online resources

- [National Geographic Kids](#) has a wide range of videos, games and quizzes which relate to History, Geography and Science.
- [Dorling Kindersley](#) has videos, fun facts and quizzes on a range of topics, especially on the area of SESE.
- [Starfall](#) available in both website and app, has games and stories to support the learning of phonics and reading. It is particularly useful for Junior Infants to 1st Class.

- [Teach Your Monster to Read](#), available in both website and app, supports children in learning to read.
- [GoNoodle](#) provides videos of dances, exercises and physical activities. It is used in schools to keep children active.
- [Matific](#) are offering free access for 60 days to its digital Mathematics resources for primary schools.
- This Irish visual arts website [I Am An Artist](#) has short videos, slideshows, lessons and projects for primary school pupils.

Appendix 2: Promoting positive health and wellbeing

- The [National Educational Psychological Service \(NEPS\)](#) provides valuable advice and resources to schools and families for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19.
- [Tusla Education Support Service \(TESS\)](#) provides important information for schools, parents and guardians and young people.
- The HSE webpage [YourMentalHealth website](#) provides information and signposting on all mental health supports and services that are available nationally and locally provided by the HSE and its funded partners.
- The HSE webpage [Mental Health Supports and Services during COVID-19](#) gives details of the service providers that offer online and phone mental health supports and services during the current crisis. It lists a range of services and resources to help young people cope and manage themselves in the current crisis. Contacts for Jigsaw; BeLong To; Reach Out; Spunout; Barnardos, Childline etc. are listed. The webpage also give details of mobile apps that may be used to manage anxiety.
- Local authorities (councils) have established a Community Response Forum to coordinate Covid-19 related community supports. As part of this, each local authority has now established a helpline listed at [www.gov.ie - Contact Details for Local Authorities](#) that vulnerable people can phone if they are looking for basic services such as delivery of food or meals, or transport for essential trips.
- Teachers' attention is directed to the Department's Employee Assistance and Wellbeing Programme. Details are available at the following link: [Employee Assistance and Wellbeing programme](#)