



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs

For primary and special 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 with special educational needs during the school closures associated with COVID-19.¹ 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.

The need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling is particularly important. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Indeed, many schools have introduced a range of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for. 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.

Key themes of this guidance

- The role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN
- Teachers and school leaders working to support pupils with SEN
- Keeping in touch with parents and guardians
- Keeping pupils with SEN safe in the distance learning environment
- Resources for teachers

The role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN

Pupils with SEN can be particularly vulnerable as they cope with not being at school, with changes in their daily routine, and with not seeing their friends or teachers. Keeping the pupil connected to learning and to the school through engagement with their teachers is critical for pupils with SEN at this time.

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

The role of mainstream class teachers

In all schools, class teachers continue to have overall responsibility for the education of pupils, including those with SEN. During the closure period, mainstream class teachers should continue to differentiate tasks appropriately to match the learning needs of pupils with SEN. They should gauge the success of this differentiated approach through assessment of pupils' efforts, where possible and they should provide regular feedback to parents and guardians and pupils on days and times that have been agreed. While the feedback provided will necessarily be different to that provided in a classroom setting, teachers should focus on affirming pupils' efforts and motivating them to continue their efforts and using the outcomes of the engagement to further differentiate their programmes. Mainstream class teachers should consult with colleagues and the SEN team to ensure a coordinated whole-school approach to assigning work to pupils with SEN.

The role of the special education teacher

The special education teacher (SET) is pivotal in ensuring that there is continuity in the learning of pupils with SEN. SETs should therefore be regularly communicating and engaging with the pupils on their caseload.

The SET's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets as outlined in the pupil support file will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment. SETs should carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets can be reasonably extended by home learning. They should use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

In supporting the learning of pupils with SEN, the following are important elements of the SET's role:

- Liaising with mainstream class teachers to ensure an appropriate programme of work for the pupil with SEN; the programme should, as far as possible, be personalised to the pupil's needs
- Reviewing the pupil's support plans to identify aspects of the programme that can be worked on in the home environment
- Actively communicate and agree the programme of work with the pupil's parents and guardians taking account of their capacity to communicate in English or Irish
- Identifying and using technological and resource options available to the teacher and the pupils to support learning
- Supporting parents and guardians, where possible and practicable, to use the technology used by the school to support pupils' engagement in learning
- Providing regular opportunities for the pupil to engage with the SET using various platforms as appropriate and available

- Where possible, sharing specific resources or individualised supports with parents and guardians, for example, those that are calming and regulating for pupils with autism
- Emphasising opportunities for pupils in special schools in particular to learn in their home environment, including participating in structured activities related to life skills and independent living.

Here are some practical ways in which special education teachers can engage with their pupils:

- Phone
- Provision of hard copy work packs to parents and guardians²
- E-mail
- Online video communication apps such as Skype and Seesaw
- Audio-visual online platforms so they can talk with and see the parent and the pupil and provide online learning support.

Example 1: Special School (Severe / Profound Learning Disability)

The class teacher is the parents' point of school contact and they are in regular contact by text and phone. The teacher has agreed a timetable and goals for the pupils and has sent home familiar resources. These include objects of reference representing meaningful activities, places and people, items for calming exercises, a selection of percussion musical instruments and an iPad with relevant apps already installed. The teacher pre-records a selection of familiar short stories, nursery rhymes and songs on a weekly basis which are emailed home. The pupils' parents record samples of the pupils' responses and return these to the teacher.

The role of special needs assistants

Under Circular 0024/2020, all special needs assistants (SNAs) are to be nominated for temporary assignment. The temporary assignment of SNAs to the Health Service Executive (HSE) children's disability services will be a crucial support to strengthen efforts to support vulnerable families with children/ young people that have complex disability needs. In many cases, individual SNAs are already continuing to support families since the school closure period began. While this is welcome, the immediate focus will be on continuing that support in a structured manner through the HSE.

² School personnel should at all times observe public health directives in place in relation to accessing school buildings. Provision of hard copy work packs may be only be possible in the event of teachers being permitted to access school buildings.

If an SNA has been reassigned to HSE work, s/he will not be subject to management by the school for the duration of the assignment. However, communication channels between the school and the SNA must be facilitated where appropriate to ensure that SNAs can receive guidance where educational issues arise during the course of the suite of supports being provided by the HSE teams during this period.

Teachers and school leaders working to support pupils with SEN

The current school closures require schools and teachers to use new means of ensuring continuity of learning for pupils with SEN while they are out of the school environment. However, these new means will be informed by the same steps that underpin teachers' practices in school settings: planning; implementing; monitoring; and reviewing. In assigning work to be done at home by pupils with SEN, schools and teachers should be mindful of the pressures that some families may be experiencing and not overburden pupils with large amounts of homework that require adult assistance.

There are many solutions to the remote learning challenge currently being used successfully by schools and examples of these are outlined below. It is important to note that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) support services and personnel and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologists are available to support schools to assist them in devising their approaches to remote learning for pupils with SEN. Additionally, schools could examine the feasibility of linking with locally-based support or community agencies, including disability organisations, to assist in that regard.

The programme of work for pupils with SEN should be managed and coordinated at a whole-school level, involving school management, the special education team and class teachers. It should be guided by the principles and roles outlined in the Department's [*Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs \(2017\)*](#). Schools should use the special education teaching resources provided to them to ensure that pupils with SEN continue to receive appropriate levels of support according to their level of need.

Planning should be pupil focused and aligned with the learning targets as set out in the support file for the pupil. It should be informed by the individual circumstances and needs of parents and guardians and pupils at this time. In planning the programme of work for pupils with SEN, it is important to ensure that:

- There is communication with the parents and guardians to ensure that a realistic level of support can be provided without overburdening the parent or the family
- Parents and guardians are fully aware of the learning supports, resources and approaches adopted by the class teacher and SET to engage their child in learning activities
- Key personnel including teachers and other staff, such as therapeutic staff, are available to deliver the supports to students

- Technological and teaching resources are available to teachers to support them in their work, including online textbooks
- There are opportunities for teachers in the school to collaborate and share practice and resources; teachers with ICT expertise should have opportunities to share their expertise with SETs and other teachers
- There is due regard to the school's policy on online safety in the distance learning environment for pupils with SEN, particularly in relation to safe and ethical use of the internet, keeping personal data safe, and child protection³.

The school leadership team will have a key role in monitoring and affirming the whole-school effort to ensure consistency and promote sharing of practice. This team, comprising the principal and those with assigned management or coordination duties, will also have a role in encouraging and supporting teachers as they develop their practices towards distance learning for pupils with SEN and ensuring support for teachers' wellbeing as they engage with new challenges.

Example 2: ASD Special Class (Primary)

The special class teachers use Google Meet for team meetings. They check in with pupils daily using Facetime. Teachers and parents communicate regularly by email or text. They have agreed weekly goals with an emphasis on the priority functional skills. The teachers share online resources with the home. A pack has been sent home containing books, social stories, art equipment, iPad, and visual supports/reminders (for example, breathing exercises, daily schedule, wait card). Parents record and email a sample of children's activities to the class teacher who refers to them in daily interactions with the children.

Keeping in touch with parents and guardians

At this time, schools and teachers need to be sensitive to the challenges that families face in providing structure for their children and in helping their engagement in learning. It is also important to remember that the parent is not a teacher and cannot be expected to take the place of the teacher. The role of the parent is to support their child's engagement in learning to the extent that it is feasible and practicable.

Effective and regular communication between school and home will be key to ensuring that changing roles, approaches and expectations, which are necessary in the current

³ For advice on responding to child protection concerns in relation to pupils that schools and teachers come into contact with, please see *Guidance in Continuity of Schooling for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (p.9) published by the Department on 2 April 2020.

challenging circumstances, are understood by all concerned. Schools should remind parents and guardians of the importance of making time and space available every day for their child to continue to engage in learning. The Department's *Guidance on Continuity for Schooling for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (p. 8) provides general advice to schools about the importance of communicating with all parents and guardians.

In addition to that advice, schools should work to co-ordinate the key messages for parents and guardians of children with SEN and ensure that the tone of the messages is supportive and shows understanding of the exceptional situation families find themselves in. School leaders and teachers need to agree communication protocols with families in order to protect the personal details of the families and the teachers involved.

SETs should maintain regular contact with the parents and guardians of pupils on their caseloads even if the purpose of some conversations is limited to a courtesy check-in, general supportive conversation or listening to parental concerns. SETs, where appropriate, can also support and advise parents and guardians on how to support their children's learning with 'achievable' learning activities that have a clear focus on home-learning rather than on home-teaching. For parents and guardians of children with more complex needs, contact with parents and guardians may need to occur daily.

Here are some options for SETs in communicating with individual parents and guardians of pupils with SEN:

- Affirming what parents and guardians have done to date and reassuring them that there are many opportunities for their child to learn in and around the home through, for example, physical activities
- Emphasising the importance of play, both structured and unstructured, especially for younger learners
- Encouraging parents and guardians to mind their own health and wellbeing as the wellbeing of children with SEN starts with that of their parents and guardians and carers
- Involving the pupils, where possible, in agreeing the extent of the work programme
- Supporting parents and guardians to install child friendly web-browsers and internet filters or to access digital learning tools
- Advising parents and guardians on appropriate prompts, approaches to best methods for their child that are similar, in so far as that is possible, to the approach taken in the school environment.

Example 3: Mainstream Class (Primary) Pupil with ASD and ADHD

The SET is the nominated school liaison for the pupil's family. She telephones the parents at least twice a week and has devised an at-home support plan. She sent home a pack containing familiar resources and materials. She also advised parents on creating a structured home learning environment. The SET emails Sudoku and word puzzles to the pupil every week, and they are using mind maps to plan a history project. Every Friday, the SET hosts a familiar social skills board game session with the pupil and peers using video-conferencing technology. This support is in addition to that provided by the class teacher.

Example 4: ASD Early Intervention Special Class (Attached to a Primary School)

The teacher phones the parents three times a week. Agrees weekly goals, based on the pupil support plan, are emailed to the parents. These focus on developing self-regulation, functional living and communication skills. The teacher interacts with pupils every day by phone. The teacher prepares a pack containing visual schedules, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and calming resources, and visual prompt cards to support transitioning, sensory breaks, and emotional regulation. The teacher also prepares and shares a stress kit. The teacher provides brief weekly updates to the principal on the progress and wellbeing of all pupils in the early intervention special class.

Keeping pupils with SEN safe in the distance learning environment

The Department's *Guidance on Continuity of Schooling for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (p. 9) 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.

In addition to this advice, schools should:

- research apps and online learning platforms being used in line with guidance offered by the PDST on its [Technology in Education](#) website
- be consistent in the platforms used, particularly for pupils with autism,
- ensure that pupils are familiar with the platforms before they are used to support teaching and learning
- provide support to parents and guardians as necessary in accessing digital learning tools for their children and in installing child-friendly web-browsers and internet filters

Teachers also should:

- use the opportunity to teach web safety skills, such as the use of avatars instead of real photographs
- establish clear ground rules and expectations with parents and guardians and pupils when using online learning platforms
- encourage correct posture for pupils, providing visual prompts and videos where necessary.

Resources for teachers

There are many online resources available to support the education of pupils with SEN. While many of these resources predate the school closures, some sites have updated their content to reflect the challenges of providing supports remotely. The list of resources provided in Appendix 1 is not intended to be exhaustive. Many schools will already be drawing from the resources identified and others besides. It should be noted that the DES does not endorse any particular external tools or resources.

Appendix 1: Resources to support continued engagement with learning

NCSE 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. The site contains a [section for teachers](#) and a [section for parents and guardians](#).
- The resources are prepared by teachers (NCSE advisors), visiting teachers, behavioural practitioners, SLTs and OTs. There are also links to many useful educational websites to direct parents and guardians and teachers towards further online supports. There is a short section on [useful apps for home use](#). The app section is currently updated twice a week.
- NCSE's network of advisors also remain available to schools and teachers via NCSE's online application form. They provide support and advice by telephone and email to support teachers of students with SEN. The form is available [here](#).
- Special Education Needs Organisers (SENO's) and Visiting Teachers for students who are deaf/hard of hearing or blind/visually impaired continue to maintain contact with schools and parents by telephone and by email. Their contact details are available at [NCSE Regional Services Contact List](#).

NEPS resources

- The [National Educational Psychological Service \(NEPS\) website](#) provides valuable advice for schools and families on topics such as wellbeing, distance learning and provision for student routine and structure.
- NEPS has provided resources on literacy, transition planning etc. in the Guidelines, Tips and Handouts for Parents and Teacher section of their [Resources and Publications](#) webpage.

Autism-specific resources

- [Middletown Centre for Autism](#) hosts twice weekly webinars from in-house and international speakers. There is online learning for teachers and parents and guardians on the [virtual learning environment](#) and there are online resources including videos on how to use autism specific strategies. The website has social media links (Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter) for tips on helping children and young people manage during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Other useful resources include:
 - [Teenage Resource](#)
 - [Life Skills Resource](#)
 - [Building Capacity Resource](#)
 - [Best Practice Resource](#)
 - [Sensory Processing](#)

- [AslAm's website](#) contains explanations on the COVID -19 situation for students with ASD through the [use of social stories](#). There are [resources for learning at home](#) and also an article from psychotherapist Michael Ryan on [how to manage the emotional issues](#) during the current situation.

Distance learning resources

- The [PDST website page on distance learning](#) provides access to all PDST distance learning resources, including online support for teachers who require upskilling to engage learners remotely. The PDST has developed a set of distance learning Primary Literacy supports which can be accessed at the link [here](#).
- The Scoilnet site at <https://www.scoilnet.ie/> identifies resources for distance learning, home access and links relevant to the school closures on the Department's support services.
- The [National Centre for Guidance in Education](#) (NCGE) has prepared materials to support post-primary schools in their engagement with students which can be accessed [here](#).
- Webwise at <https://www.webwise.ie> provides a range of free primary and secondary school teaching resources addressing a range of topics including cyberbullying, image-sharing, social media and more. Webwise offers a range of resources to help teachers integrate internet safety into teaching and learning and information and advice for parents and guardians and children themselves.

Other resources

- The HSE webpage [Mental Health Support Services for Young People](#) 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; Childline; etc. are listed. Topics covered include exercise, managing routines, COVID-19 anxiety, family conflict, and staying connected. There are also resources for parents and guardians.
- The [Inclusion Ireland](#) website includes [links to supports](#) for a range of learning activities including lesson worksheets suitable for students with SEN. It also has links to activities such as music therapy videos on YouTube.
- 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](#).