

Letter from Norma Foley, Minister for Education to all parents

12 January 2021

Parents of students receiving remote learning

Dear Parent/Guardian

I hope that you and your families are keeping safe and well at this difficult time.

As you know, from yesterday Monday 11 January, schools will be closed to students and all students at primary and post-primary level will now move to a programme of remote learning.

While NPHE is of the view that schools remain safe environments, the decision to close schools was taken in order to minimise mobility of the entire population and to support the suppression of the Covid-19 virus in the community. This will allow everyone to reduce their contacts, with a view to reducing the spread of the virus and a swift return to school for all.

Remote Learning during this period

Following the initial period of school closure last year, the Department has engaged with the education partners to revise remote teaching and learning guidance. This was agreed with all stakeholders last year and guidance for primary and post-primary schools was subsequently published online in October and December 2020 respectively.

As such, during this time, all teachers, including special education teachers (SETs), are required to continue to support teaching and learning for all pupils/students in their class/subject group or on their caseload.

Schools have been advised of the need to ensure appropriate provision and support for pupils/students during this time. Every school has been advised of the need to develop a contingency plan for remote learning that is appropriate to children's different ages and stages, and has been provided with guidance on best practice. The guidance provided to schools notes that 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. These guidelines are listed at the end of this letter.

Schools have been provided with funding as part of the Digital Strategy for Schools. In 2020 funding totaling €100m in 2020 was provided to schools and schools have been advised to prioritise supporting the purchase of devices for students who may not have access to devices for remote learning. The School Support services that are funded by the Department have developed a suite of materials to assist teachers in using an online platform to support teaching, learning and assessment. Furthermore, there is a range of supports available to schools from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Junior Cycle for Teachers, An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscoilaíochta, National Educational Psychological Service, Education Centres and the Centre for School Leadership.

There has been an excellent take up by teachers throughout the country of training and supports provided in this area, and I know that schools will do their utmost in these difficult circumstances to provide the best possible experience for students. Schools will contact parents directly with their plans and arrangements for remote learning.

The Inspectorate of the Department will continue to offer an advisory service to schools to support the delivery of remote learning and to provide assistance to school leaders in particular. The Inspectorate will also evaluate and report on the quality of educational provision for students at this time.

Returning to in-person learning for all schools

The Department is conscious that closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family and societal level. For children, it impacts on wellbeing, learning, on social and emotional development.

School closure has significant impacts on children with special educational needs. School closure also heightens student anxiety, particularly for the Leaving Certificate cohort, in relation to state examinations.

The Government decision included provision that in-person learning would be maintained for two specific cohorts from Monday 11, pupils/ students attending special schools and classes and final year Leaving Certificate students. Despite the confirmation by Public Health that schools remain safe, unfortunately it has not proved possible to get agreement to provide in-person learning for these two groups. In these circumstance there is no alternative but to pause the limited reopening and continue engagement with partners. I will keep parents of these students updated on this engagement.

The latest public health advice received by Government is available [here](#). It clearly outlines that schools are safe environments, and that the protective measures and the considerable supports put in place to support schools have been successful.

Where there have been cases in schools, the enhanced school teams put in place by Public Health and the Department have worked effectively to support schools, and the level of transmission in schools has been low. Because of this, we continue to aim to return all students to in-person learning as soon as it is possible to do so.

Supports and wellbeing

It is important that students experience continuity of learning during this period to the extent that is possible for your family, bearing in mind your child's age and stage. Research conducted in Ireland concluded that while online learning worked for some students during the period of school closure, it did not replicate the in-school learning experience – this was also the experience internationally.

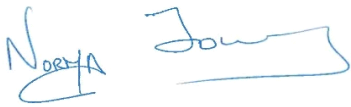
We all know that it can be difficult to achieve maximum interaction with remote learning, with many competing demands and restrictions. The best advice is that you provide the support that

is possible for your family to your child and that you prioritise your child's and your own wellbeing, balancing that with supporting learning, during this period.

Links to some supports available are provided below.

I wish you and your family all the very best at this time, and hope to communicate soon with you on a safe return to in-person learning for all.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Norma Foley', with a horizontal line underneath.

Norma Foley TD
Minister for Education

Information on guidance provided to schools on remote learning

The guidance provided to schools that 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, and sets out the following requirements:

- 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 special educational needs: 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.

Further details are available here:

- [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.](#)

[Circular 0074/2020](#)

- Guidance for parents/ guardians on supporting continuity of learning can be found [here](#) and is available in multiple languages.

Wellbeing

The wellbeing of all children and families is important, and the National Educational Psychological Service has a range of supports available on gov.ie/schools in the parents section which you may find useful. This material is being updated regularly so please check back: Gov.ie/schools/wellbeing.