



An Roinn Oideachais  
agus Scileanna  
Department of  
Education and Skills

# **Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage**

## **For post-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 students at risk of educational disadvantage during the school closures associated with Covid-19<sup>1</sup>.

Students in a range of education settings may be at risk of educational disadvantage. Contexts which can give rise to this risk include socio-economic disadvantage, being a Traveller or a member of the Roma and migrant communities, and accommodation arrangements, including homelessness or residing in a direct provision setting. This guidance also 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 students at risk of educational disadvantage. These range from student support 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 students at risk of disadvantage to have regular, ongoing schooling is particularly important. While all students 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 students are catered for, including students 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.

### Key themes of this guidance

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

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

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

In the current context, schools and teachers have to consider teaching and learning from a different perspective. Students' routines and support mechanisms have been impacted significantly and, in some instances, home circumstances may be challenging in terms of continuity in the students' 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 students and that school leaders have taken the steps necessary to identify students who are at risk of not progressing their education
- Boards should also support their school leadership teams in working to engage these students 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 students 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 students 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 students' levels of engagement from no engagement, to partial and full engagement to inform the identification and planning of strategies to re-engage students.
- Guidance counsellors have a key role to play in supporting students. This support is particularly important at times when students have become disengaged or demotivated.

As a means of enhancing continuity of learning, particularly for learners at risk of educational disadvantage, guidance counsellors could do the following:

- Clarify student perceptions of the difficulties, explore why they have become disengaged, and identify the obstacles and barriers to learning
- Re-motivate students by reminding them about previous achievements, discuss different learning strategies that have been successful and what might work now
- Re-engage students in goal setting and decision making
- Focus on future plans, the value of learning and probable outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

Schools should consider using all available supports, both in-school and community-based, to engage with students. 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 students.

In some instances, students 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, with a view, in turn, to making contact with the student. Once contact has been established, its frequency will depend on the identified needs of the students concerned; in some cases, for example, it will be daily. However, contact should be supportive in nature and affirming of students' efforts.

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

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

- Frequent contact between the school and the student; in some instances, particularly for students following the Leaving Certificate Applied<sup>3</sup> (LCA) programme, this should be daily
- Use existing student support and care structures to identify the barriers for those students who are most at risk or who may have disengaged

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, please see [Continuity of Guidance Counselling - Guidelines for Schools Providing Online Support for Students](#) available on the DES website.

<sup>3</sup> Please refer to Appendix 1 for links to resources to assist teachers of LCA programmes.

- Engage with parents and students 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 student, in order to make contact
- Reassure students that any contact from them will be received positively and support will be offered
- Praise students frequently for engaging with the school and continue any rewards system that is in place
- Prioritise students 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 students and families
- Continue SCP interventions, including mentoring for students, where possible and practicable, or adjust interventions that students availed of prior to school closures
- Engage with TESS personnel to continue to proactively engage with all students at risk and their families during these challenging times.

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

- *Post information packs to students 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 students*
- *Provide phones to identified students who have no means of communication*
- *Provide a dedicated help line which students can use and a guarantee of receiving a return call from the school*
- *Survey students to establish what is working well for them*
- *Set up a mentoring system where both staff and students can act as mentors to support, encourage and motivate students*
- *Send a communication to the parents and guardians of the student by post, 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 students in the community*
- *Provide students with tables and chairs to do schoolwork where needed.*

## The role of teachers in engaging with students in learning

Most of the strategies outlined in this guidance are intended to be used by post-primary schools. Many may also be suitable for use in other settings where post-primary school-aged children are to be found, including Youth Encounter Project schools and schools attached to Special Care Units (SCUs). Teachers at the different levels will take account of their students' ages and abilities in devising programmes of learning. Teachers should encourage their students to follow the relevant learning based on the curricular programme that the students are pursuing. Teachers should attempt to achieve a balance in the nature of work assigned to students to facilitate creativity and independent research while also keeping students on task. Where appropriate, teachers should encourage students to maintain a 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 students' learning:

- Adapt approaches to ensure that for those students 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 students can achieve some success
- Scaffold work and provide manageable components so as to maximise completion rates and not overwhelm students
- Tap into knowledge of individual students' interests to devise student-centred learning tasks accordingly
- Provide students 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 students' own physical surroundings
- Invite the students to submit work on a completely open task which the student identifies for him/herself.

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

- *Post work and materials to students who are not able to engage digitally*
- *Upload 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*
- *Upload a video demonstration on the school website of physical exercise routines that students could do at home.*
- *Set up systems so that groups of learners can work together, either by phone or internet.*

## Focusing on students' literacy and numeracy skills

In ensuring continuity of learning for students at risk of educational disadvantage, it is important that schools continue to provide opportunities for those students 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 students to write a short story using a small set of random words*
- *Invite students to submit a book or film review and award a prize*
- *Offer loans of books from the school library*
- *Communicate to students about JCSP library activities that are ongoing*
- *Send supportive texts to parents 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 and guardians and students to join Libraries Ireland (see Appendix 1 for details)*
- *Connect students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) of the same home language group to work together on tasks*
- *Connect students with EAL of different languages to teach each other one new word a day in their home language*
- *Ask students with EAL to watch the news in their own language and provide a summary in English.*

*Here are some 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 students 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 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 translation of communication with the parents and guardians of students 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, VSWare*
- *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 students 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 to support parents and guardians with EAL in their understanding of any school communication.*

The role of the HSCL teacher in DEIS schools in linking with parents and guardians of students 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. The importance of regular phone calls and contact by the HSCL cannot be overstated.

Schools should continue to use their existing programmes to support students' upcoming transitions into, within or from post-primary schools. Where schools have the services of the SCP, this should be availed of to support identified students who may



require additional support. It is very important that communication is sent to parents, guardians and students to assure them that, as much support and information as possible in relation to the next stage of education will be made available to them. This will help reduce anxiety among students and parents and guardians.

### **Staying safe in the distance learning environment**

Staying safe in the distance learning environment is critically important for schools, teachers, parents and guardians, and students. For guidance on this issue, please refer to the Department's [Guidance on Continuity for Schooling for Primary and Post-Primary Schools](#) (p.9) which was published on 2 April 2020. It 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 student wellbeing in that document (p.7).

### **Resources**

A list of useful resources is provided in Appendix 1 and 2 to support the work of schools in continuing to engage with students at risk of educational disadvantage. These resources relate to teaching and learning, 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 students 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, and all relevant professional and teaching networks 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 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 and guardians and teachers towards further online supports.
- NCSE's network of advisors also remain available to schools via NCSE's online application form to provide support and advice by telephone and email to teachers of students with SEN. The form is available [here](#).

### Professional Development Service for Teachers resources

- The PDST provides a range of resources relating to provision for students at risk of educational disadvantage including resources for teachers of JCSP and LCA programmes. These can be accessed using the following links:
  - For JCSP resources, please see the [JCSP](#) and [JCSP Libraries](#) websites.
  - For LCA resources, please see the list [available here](#) through the Scoilnet website and also the [LCA Teacher Handbook](#)
- The PDST provides links to a number of post-primary EAL supports and resources which can be accessed [here](#). PDST also suggest websites which can be used to provide support to students with EAL and can be accessed [here](#).
- The PDST post-primary PE team has also produced videos and activities to support students in practising their fundamental movement skills at home in its [Beyond the Classroom](#) resource.
- The PDST Maths team is uploading [Daily Maths](#) resource banks for post-primary students. A different mathematics topic is covered each day during the school closure period.

### Distance learning resources

- The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) website page on [distance learning](#) provides support for teachers to engage with learners remotely. Supports include an online teaching course, information about platforms, and distance learning supports for Health and Wellbeing.
- The [Scoilnet](#) website identifies resources for distance learning, home access and 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.
- The [JCSP Demonstration Library Project](#) website has links to a myriad of resources for schools and students categorised by topic and subject area.

### State Examinations Commission resources

- The [State Examinations Commission](#) provides resources for students preparing for state examinations. These include materials such as previous examination papers, marking schemes and important contact information.

### Online reading resources

- Students 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 providing free access to books and audio stories available.

### 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.

### General online resources

- [World news](#) from the BBC in many languages is a useful resource for students with EAL.
- [National Geographic Kids](#) has a wide range of videos, games and quizzes that relate to History, Geography and Science.
- This Irish visual arts website [I Am An Artist](#) has short videos, slideshows, lessons and projects for schools.

## Guidance-related learning websites

- The DES [Continuity of Guidance Counselling Guidelines](#) offer support and advice to schools as they consider how to provide guidance counselling online. Additional supporting documents and training resources are also available on the [National Centre for Guidance in Education](#) website. The full suite of supports can be accessed at on the DES website [here](#).
- Education, training and career information is available on the [Qualifax](#) website.
- Education, training and career information, including information on the REACH+ programme is available on the [Careers Portal](#) website.
- The CAO has opened a [dedicated page with FAQ](#) to support applicants. It also offers an email service for any query which can be accessed [here](#).
- The [Access College](#) website provides information on equity of access to higher education and information on DARE and HEAR applications.
- The [Student Universal Support Ireland \(SUSI\)](#) website provides information on making grant applications.

Individual colleges and Higher Education Institutions are providing applicants with online support and advice including helplines and one-to-one support. See individual websites for more information.

## Appendix 2: Promoting positive health and wellbeing

- The [National Educational Psychological Service \(NEPS\)](#) provides valuable advice for schools and families on topics such as wellbeing, distance learning and provision for student routine and structure.
- [Tusla Education Support Service \(TESS\)](#) is the school support service under Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Important information is available for schools, parents and guardians and young people.
- The HSE webpage [YourMentalHealth website](#) provides information 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 services providers that offer online and phone mental health supports and services during the current crisis. It lists a range of services and resources that are available 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](http://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](#)