

Subject:

Circular Number: 2021/25

**FURTHER GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS ON SUPPORTING
REMOTE LEARNING TO PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL
CONTINUITY**

Date of Issue:

6 December 2021

Target Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all nursery, primary, post-primary and special grant-aided schools
- Management Committees of all voluntary providers
- Education Authority (EA)
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)
- Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC)
- Proprietors of Independent Schools
- Governing Bodies Association of Voluntary Grammar Schools in NI (GBANI)
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)
- General Teaching Council for NI (GTCNI)
- Teachers' Unions
- EOTAS Centres
- Middletown Centre for Autism
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS)

Summary of Contents:

This circular provides further advice and guidance to schools on supporting remote learning.

Enquiries:

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Governor Awareness:

Essential

Status of Contents:

Guidance for schools

Expiry Date:

None

This circular provides further advice and guidance to schools on supporting remote learning.

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Further Guidance for Schools on Supporting Remote Learning to Provide Educational Continuity

Introduction

1. School leaders and staff are working extremely hard to continue to provide high quality education to children and young people in difficult circumstances. The purpose of this circular is to give updated advice and guidance to schools on the use of remote learning at this time.
2. Since the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year, the Department has asked schools to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning in the event of a school closure, or if a class or any larger group of pupils across a year group need to self-isolate.
3. Currently, some schools are experiencing difficulties in sourcing a sufficient number of substitute teachers to cover staff absences due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly acute in certain sectors, subject areas and geographical areas. There have also been shortages of support and ancillary staff. Schools may need to utilise remote learning in such circumstances.
4. The Department, in conjunction with our education support bodies, is actively considering a range of options for how best to further assist schools in responding to the staffing issues they currently face. A short survey is being issued to all schools to ascertain the extent of difficulties schools are experiencing.

What is Remote Learning?

5. Remote learning is where the student and teacher are not physically present in a traditional classroom environment for a specified period. Educational resources, information and support for pupils is provided through hard copy resources and/or online, including through digital learning platforms.

6. Remote learning can occur synchronously with real-time teacher to pupil or peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration, or asynchronously, with self-paced learning activities that take place independently of the teacher.

When can remote learning be used?

7. There are no plans to close schools early this term or to move to remote learning more generally across the education system. Any decision to close schools would be taken by the Northern Ireland Executive and be based on medical and scientific advice.
8. Schools are providing high quality education to children and young people and want to maintain face-to-face learning if at all possible. Schools leaders have, however, the flexibility to utilise remote learning in the following circumstances:
 - where a group of pupils or a class are required to self-isolate due to COVID-19;
 - where schools are experiencing staff shortages and have not been able to secure sufficient substitute teaching cover to operate classes effectively; and
 - where schools are experiencing support or ancillary staff shortages which may compromise the safe and effective operation of the school.
9. The Department recognises the significant pressures that schools are currently facing. It is, however, extremely important that we maximise face-to-face teaching for pupils. To this end, remote learning should not be utilised in circumstances other than those described above. For example, schools should not use remote learning to facilitate study leave prior to school exams commencing; provide additional staff development time or in response to anxieties about school attendance due to Christmas holiday arrangements.
10. As in normal circumstances, if pupils are ill they should take time to rest and recover and should not be working from home.

11. Where schools are considering employing remote learning due to staffing shortages, the Department would encourage schools to consider the issues set out below:

- Where schools have to utilise remote learning due to staffing shortages, they are strongly encouraged to consider the provision of supervised learning for vulnerable pupils, including pupils with Special Educational Needs and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Schools may also wish to have available, if possible, shared space within their schools for pupils who wish to attend for supervised learning, in particular for situations where both parents are working;
- Schools with smaller class sizes, may consider the use of composite classes for short periods;
- Post-primary schools should consider whether it is possible to provide a partial timetable, with supervised learning in subject areas where it has not been possible to source substitute teaching cover. This may of course not always be possible due to wider staffing shortages; and
- When considering moving to remote learning provision for a significant number of classes or year groups, post-primary schools are encouraged to consider whether they can prioritise continued face-to-face learning for Years 11 to 14 and in particular for pupils in Years 12 and Year 14, who are completing qualifications in 2021/22.

Nature of Remote Learning - Guidance and Support

12. The Department's Circular 2021/01 [Guidance on Remote Learning](#) provides advice and guidance to schools on supporting remote learning. It outlines a range of key principles which should underpin schools' approaches to their remote learning programmes. The Department has also simplified its remote learning guidance into a one-page, quick glance document for schools entitled [Effective Practice in Remote Learning](#).

13. The [Education Endowment Foundation \(EEF\)](#) has found that the effectiveness of remote teaching is determined by many of the same factors as determine the effectiveness of classroom teaching. For example:

- ensuring pupils receive clear explanations;
- supporting growth in confidence with new material through scaffolded practice;
- application of new knowledge or skills; and
- enabling pupils to receive feedback on how to progress.

These characteristics of good teaching are more important than the medium of delivery.

14. The Department recognises that schools will wish to support pupils as much as possible. However, in circumstances where teachers are continuing to teach face-to-face classes or a large number of teachers are unwell, expectations must be realistic. The Department fully recognises that it may not be possible for schools to provide the same volume of remote learning as during the extended period of closures in Spring 2021.

15. The Department recommends that wherever possible when remote learning is used, schools should have in place systems for checking daily that pupils are engaging with their work and procedures for monitoring work completion and engagement across the curriculum.

16. An ongoing focus for schools in planning for remote learning should be on developing a repository of asynchronous learning materials which can be deployed in such circumstances, including pre-recorded lessons. Online video lessons do not necessarily need to be recorded by teaching staff at the school. High quality lessons developed by external providers can be provided in lieu of school led video content. All schools are encouraged to actively plan for the eventuality that they may need to provide remote learning in circumstances of staff shortages.

17. Schools will wish to take a pragmatic approach to the delivery of the curriculum by prioritising key knowledge, understanding and skills in each area of learning.

Barriers to Remote Learning

18. The Department is conscious that all pupils do not have the same levels of home support nor do all households have the same level of access to resources, particularly printing facilities, internet connection and data and devices such as tablets and laptops.

19. Schools should give careful consideration to the barriers pupils may experience to accessing remote learning and work to overcome these barriers. Schools will continue to help overcome these barriers by distributing school-owned laptops or other devices and supplementing digital provision with different forms of remote learning such as providing access to printed resources or textbooks. Schools may find it helpful to maintain an up-to-date record of which pupils and families do not have sufficient devices or appropriate internet access.

20. Consideration should be given at all times to ensuring availability of resources for pupils without ready online access, including through distribution of hard-copy versions, which include guidance on completion of the activities, model explanations and answers to assist pupils and also parents in supporting their child's learning.

Communication with Parents and Carers

21. Schools will know that it is important that parents and carers are clearly informed of the reasons for remote learning and the likely duration. More generally, schools should endeavour to ensure that parents and carers have clear guidance on how to support pupils at home and that both parents and pupils understand the expectations on how many hours they should be learning and how to participate in remote learning (for example, how to submit assignments).

22. The Education Endowment Foundation has provided a [guide for schools](#) on how to communicate with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, which schools may find useful.