



Circular Number: 0074/2020

To: The Managerial Authorities of Recognised Primary, Secondary, Community and Comprehensive Schools, Chief Executives of Education and Training Boards

Communication/Teaching & Learning Platform

Arising from Public Health Emergency 2020, this Circular requires all schools have in place a communication and learning platform that supports schools to respond in the event of a partial or full school closure in the future. Ideally communication and learning should be consolidated within one platform. However if schools are of the view that additional software is required to meet their needs they are free to employ such software.

It is acknowledged that this has already been put in place by many schools during the public health restrictions when pupils/students were unable to attend school. In terms of contingency for unexpected closures, it is anticipated that the school ICT infrastructure will continue to be made available to teachers and school leaders to facilitate continuity of learning.

Please note that that the issue of schools remaining open at the present time, even in the current trajectory of the disease, has been carefully considered by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET). The experience of public health to date is that transmission rates of Covid-19 in schools are low, much lower than the rate currently in the community. This is a result of the effectiveness of the public health guidelines for schools and the successful implementation and adherence of all in the school community to the guidelines.

1. Purpose of Circular

The Minister for Education requests all schools to immediately act to put in place appropriate contingency measures to ensure that schools are prepared to continue to support teaching and learning in the event of a partial or full closure of schools arising from Public Health advice.

A minimum requirement for all schools is to establish a Communications/Learning platform.

The platform should facilitate:

- communication with and between staff, with parents, and board of management meetings



- communication and engagement between teachers and pupils/students (including classroom work assignment and returns, feedback and assessment)
- remote learning in the event of a partial or full school closure. The platform should facilitate some use of live or recorded video lessons where practicable

2. Background

The events surrounding Covid-19 and the enforced closure of schools to pupils/students has highlighted the absolute necessity for schools to be prepared to support continuity of teaching and learning.

As a contingency for any reoccurrence of school or class closures and to ensure ongoing support for learning it is essential that schools build their capacity to respond. Many schools have been embedding digital technologies in teaching and learning supported by the Digital Learning Framework (DLF) and professional development in recent years. The Framework underpins the development of digital learning plans which supports schools to develop effective use of digital technologies in teaching and learning practice and in leadership and management. In developing contingency arrangements for remote learning, schools should, where possible, align this with their digital learning plans.

Building contingency planning into overall planning will better ensure that both the current and future embedding of digital technologies can be progressed. Engagement with schools, by the Department of Education Inspectorate during the period of school closure, demonstrated that while many schools were in a position to respond effectively, following public health restrictions, for others the response times were slower or capacity to respond was limited or very limited.

Many platforms which are available to facilitate communication, have proven invaluable to schools during the closures resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim now is to facilitate ongoing communication and learning within the school community. It is recognised that arising from Covid-19 many schools will have put in place some form of communications facility. It is also acknowledged that broadband may be a barrier in some schools and for school communities in some geographical areas. However, many communication platforms can still be accessed on mobile or low speed broadband services, and schools should tailor the content on those platforms to take account of differences in broadband capacity.



3. Support for implementation of Communication/Teaching & Learning Platform

To support schools, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) Digital Technologies team has developed a range of materials to assist them in using an online platform to support teaching, learning and assessment. Materials available in this regard include information and resources for [commonly used platforms for teaching, learning and assessment](#), [short video tutorials](#) exploring how digital platforms and tools can be used effectively for remote learning purposes and clarity regarding how chosen platforms can be effectively used for [assessment and feedback](#) purposes.

The [online conferencing section](#) of the PDST Digital Technologies remote learning webpage also explores how various platforms can be used for communication purposes to support remote learning and facilitate remote staff or board of management meetings. Should a school wish to avail of tailored school support from a PDST advisor in the areas highlighted above, or with regards to remote/blended learning approaches generally, applications for support can be made at www.pdst.ie/schoolsupport.

Schools can select any platform that best suits their own needs. The Department of Education does not endorse any particular platform. Schools are advised to ensure that the platform adopted by the school;

- has been approved by the school patron/Board of Management
- is GDPR compliant as per the www.gdpr4schools.ie website (agreed jointly by school management bodies)

Whatever communication/teaching & learning platform is chosen by the school it is important that whole-school up-skilling on its usage is in place. Schools might also consider creating a page/digital space on the school website providing information on the platform and its usage for the wider school community.

4. Funding for Digital Technology in schools

Over the period of implementation of the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 Enhancing Teaching Learning and Assessment*, €160m has issued to schools through ICT Grant funding, including €50m in respect of the 2019-2020 school year. Under the terms applying to this funding, schools can utilise the funding for the purchase of, inter alia:

- Cloud based tools and applications to support learning
- Learning platforms – these are generally cloud based applications used to support the teaching and learning process
- Local software or 'apps' to support learning



Rules governing the expenditure of the €40m ICT grant are contained in Circular 0031/2020 available [here](#) and information on expenditure for the top-up funding of €10m is contained in Circular 0032/2020 available [here](#). This €50m of funding issued under the ICT Grant Scheme in respect of the 2019-2020 school year. A further €50m will issue in the current school year.

Separately, the Department also funds broadband connectivity to schools. The PDST Technology in Education **Broadband Service Desk** is the single point of contact for schools for all broadband related issues, providing information, advice and support to schools. Schools can also contact ictadvice@pdst.ie regarding queries about their infrastructure (more information on technology can be found on the PDST (Technology in Education) website www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie).

5. Relevant policies to consider for review in the context of this circular include:

- **Acceptable Usage Policy** – details acceptable use of Internet enabled devices, mobile phones and related devices in the school. This policy must be agreed and signed by pupils/students and their parents/guardians. Advice available on Webwise at <https://www.webwise.ie/category/teachers/acceptable-use-policy/>
- **Anti-Bullying policy** to include reference to cyberbullying - more information available [here](#)
- **Data Protection Policy** to include reference to the use of images and social media. www.dataprotectionschools.ie is an information resource for schools to support the ongoing development of data protection policies
- **Child Protection** policies should be reviewed and, if necessary, updated to take account of teaching and learning in a remote learning environment
- **Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)** which allows pupils/students to bring their own devices, especially tablets and other suitable personal devices, into classrooms to support improving pupil/student learning outcomes. Many BYOD-suitable devices can support a more pupil/student-centred, active learning approach and can enable pupils/students to engage in more self-directed learning
- **Wellbeing**, to ensure the area of safe and ethical use of the internet is addressed in the context of the whole-school approach to wellbeing. Further advice relating to internet safety is available on **Webwise** an internet safety initiative focused on raising awareness of online safety issues and good practice among pupils/students, parents and teachers. It is funded by the Department of Education and the EU Safer Internet Programme and managed by the PDST (Technology in Education). A range of support, guidance and education resources for schools, teachers, parents and pupils/students is available from [Webwise](#). The National



Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) has developed a range of resources on wellbeing available [here](#) with further NEPS resources relating to Reopening Schools available [here](#).

6. Effective approaches to supporting learning in a remote environment

To facilitate effective approaches to supporting learning in a remote environment, schools are advised to also develop and adopt a model for learning that will support continuity of education regardless of school closure or inability of a class group or pupil/student to attend school. Relevant guidance developed by the Department will be available to support schools with their adopted approach for remote learning. Schools should incorporate planning for remote learning into their Digital Planning to build capacity for delivery of teaching and learning which will also facilitate provision in the context of remote learning if required. A new reflective tool for schools, developed by PDST, for contingency planning is available [here](#). There is also comprehensive guidance available to schools within the PDST Blended Learning Toolkit at www.pdst.ie/blendedlearning to support them in developing an appropriate approach to teaching, learning and assessment online.

See **Appendix 1: Guidance to support remote learning** for further information and links to relevant resources and **Appendix 2 – Links to Resources and Support** which has a collated list of all relevant links to resources and support.

Queries

Queries on this circular should be emailed to the following address:
ictpolicy@education.gov.ie.

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November 2020



Appendix 1: Guidance to support remote learning

Supporting continuity of learning in a remote environment

PDST has created a dedicated webpage of curated content, available [here](#). This was developed to support schools and teachers to engage in remote learning. Blended learning approaches can facilitate capacity for schools and teachers to effectively engage pupils/students in learning in a remote environment in the event that future closures are required, information available [here](#). Together with initial whole staff planning, using any of the online platforms and/or tools, detailed on this webpage, will enable schools to put in place effective approaches to limit the impact of any future school closures by facilitating teachers to provide learners with access to materials, support, classwork and feedback in an online environment either synchronously or asynchronously.

Key principles

A number of key principles underpin effective support for remote learning:

- A whole school approach to develop and guide the adoption of an appropriate model for the remote environment
- Managing in-school and remote learning environments and necessary technologies (school timetable, access to devices, broadband provision, learning platform, digital tools/resources)
- The development of digital skills of all teachers, to enable curriculum delivery by a variety of means including the use of technology in education, has to be a priority for schools
- As part of their pedagogy and in the delivery of the curriculum, teachers are expected to develop digital competency skills in their pupils/students. Pupils/students may need to be supported to develop self-management and organisational skills so they are equipped to balance in-school and remote learning
- Ongoing effective communication with parents and pupils/students to successfully adapt to a remote learning model

Implementation of remote learning

Drawing on the experience of remote learning during the Covid-19 closure, schools are recommended to review their current position and learn from the approaches adopted to facilitate ongoing teaching and learning. This will assist planning for implementation of a remote learning approach as required. The review should assist schools to consider the following relevant areas:

- Understand its own readiness to support online and remote learning and how this would interface with and supplement in-school learning. The school should also provide an opportunity for teaching staff to review how remote learning worked during school closures and how this experience can inform contingency planning



- Identify CPD needs for teachers including
 - Raising awareness about where to access professional development (internally and externally)
 - Implement a professional development plan for teachers to support the chosen model for remote learning
 - Support pupils/students in understanding and learning how to use the adopted platform
- Identify the types of resources or supports needed that are not currently in the school
- Examine elements of the curriculum which require teacher led interaction and those which are more suited to consolidation in the remote learning environment ensuring that planning includes a clear outline on how technology will be used if remote learning is required
- Identify supports that pupils/students need
- Engage with support services for advice on online learning and communication platforms
- Determine if existing online learning platforms, in use in the school, can be expanded for further functionality
- Establish a peer-support group of teachers and of pupils/students in the school to support skills development for the adopted platform
- Ensure ongoing communication with staff, pupils/students and parents on updates and changes to features and functionality of the adopted platform as contingency measures are developed.

Key considerations will include the following:

- **School leadership** to ensure a whole-school approach in developing a culture and climate for continuous improvement.
- **Teaching and Learning approach** underpinned by teacher flexibility and the readiness of the teachers to adapt to whatever model is put in place by the school including use of relevant technology in lesson preparation and delivery
- **Access to technology in the school and home** is key to engagement with remote learning where the approach adopted includes digital technology and resources:
 - Consultation and ongoing communication with parents and pupils/students on access to and skills to use technology will inform the approach that best suits the school community.
 - Specific strategies/supports for disadvantaged pupils/students, pupils/students with SEN and pupils/students at risk of disengagement. Guidance available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/965639-continuity-of-schooling/> Supporting parents to assist their engagement to facilitate the pupils/students' work at home
- **Professional Development Support** for school leaders, in promoting new approaches to teaching and learning; for teachers to develop skills



to effectively use digital technologies in their pedagogy; for pupils/students in using platforms adopted to ensure ongoing engagement with education. Customised support, including contingency planning for digital technologies, leadership, health and wellbeing, is available from the PDST by application at <https://www.pdst.ie/schoolsupport>

- **Poor Broadband/Access to Devices** must be considered in determining how to support all learners in the school with consideration of the most appropriate approach where pupils/students do not have access to broadband and/or devices. During the Covid-19 closures some schools have supported pupils/students with loans of devices and/or preparation of tasks, including assessment tasks that do not require technology which can be worked on in the home and submitted during in-school time

Models for remote learning

In general the two most applicable blended learning models suited to this contingency, as identified by PDST, are the enriched virtual model and the flipped classroom model. Some schools with well-developed use of digital technology in education are likely using a preferred model. Information on these models, which schools may find useful at the early stages of embedding remote learning and using technologies, is available [here](#).

Aspects particular to Primary

In preparing for remote learning, it is acknowledged, that pupils benefit from appropriate choice, flexibility, and multiple means of engagement and response. This supports meaningful and sustained learning experiences. It is important to review the approach adopted during Covid-19, including engagement with parents to identify the most effective solutions for future planning.

Younger pupils may be less able to engage independently and disadvantaged/SEN pupils will require more individual support. The involvement of parents in supporting primary pupils to manage remote learning is critical and effective engagement to underpin this partnership approach is essential. Further guidance on curriculum delivery in a remote environment is available for [here](#) for primary schools.

Aspects particular to Post Primary

Special provision for practical subjects will need to be considered to support a remote learning approach. At certain times in the academic year, some year groups may require increased teacher contact time (e.g. LC or JC students). Further guidance on curriculum delivery in a remote environment is available [here](#) for post-primary schools.



Digital Content (Scoilnet)

There are currently in excess of 21,000 curriculum tagged teaching and learning resources available through Scoilnet at this [link](#). These include subject resources, lesson plans, video/audio, quizzes, games and other multimedia. Scoilnet collaborates with practicing teachers to maintain and manage the content on the website. Teachers in Ireland can share their own curriculum-tagged resources through the website and create their own personal “learning paths” through the use of quality assured digital content and resources sourced from the portal.



Appendix 2 Links to Resources and Support

Organisation	Support / information	Website address
Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)	Application for tailored support (including for putting in place a communication platform)	https://pdst.ie/schoolsupport
PDST	A selection of video tutorials, showing a range of online tools, which can be used to support live remote learning as well as holding remote staff or board of management meetings	https://www.pdst.ie/DistanceLearning/VideoConferencing
PDST	Acceptable Usage Policy	https://www.webwise.ie/category/teachers/acceptable-use-policy/
PDST	Internet safety support, guidance and education resources for schools, teachers, parents and pupils/students	https://www.webwise.ie/
PDST	webpage of curated content to support schools and teachers to engage in remote learning	https://www.pdst.ie/DistanceLearning
PDST	webpage on resources available to develop effective approaches to supporting learning in a remote environment	https://pdst.ie/blendedlearning
PDST	Scoilnet contains a database of over 20,000 online resources including websites, quizzes, lesson plans, notes, video/audio, games and other multimedia. To further support remote learning, Learning Paths may be used to create and organise collections of resources found on Scoilnet	www.scoilnet.ie
PDST	TeacherCPD.ie provides a variety of online short courses to upskill in many digital areas. The following courses Teaching Online for Primary and Post Primary Teachers/during School Closures (online) and Assessment Feedback and Digital Technologies (Post Primary) have been developed to support teachers at this time.	https://teachercpd.ie/



PDST-TIE	PDST School infrastructure: Schools can contact ictadvice@pdst.ie regarding queries about their infrastructure or email broadbandservicedesk@pdst.ie regarding broadband queries. More information on technology can be found on the PDST (Technology in Education) website	www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie
PDST-TIE	Digital Learning Planning Guidelines – they provide guidance on how the DL Framework can support the creation of a Digital Learning Plan for each school	https://www.pdsttechnologyineducation.ie/en/Planning/Digital-Learning-Planning-Guidelines.pdf
Dept. of Education (DE)	Rules governing the expenditure of the €40m ICT grant (Circular 0031/2020)	https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/297e8f-grant-scheme-for-ict-infrastructure-20192020-school-year/
DE	Information on expenditure for the top-up funding of €10m (Circular 0032/2020)	https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/06b3d8-grant-scheme-for-ict-infrastructure-20192020-school-year-10m-funding/
DE	Specific strategies/supports for disadvantaged pupils/students, pupils/students with SEN and pupils/students at risk of disengagement	https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/965639-continuity-of-schooling/
DE	Digital Learning Framework – this was developed to provide a roadmap to help schools manage the transformation of teaching and learning as a result of new digital technologies	https://www.gov.ie/en/service/8ae17-digital-learning-framework/
DE	Further guidance on curriculum delivery for reopening schools is available as follows: Re-opening of Schools: Primary Re-opening of Schools: Post-Primary	https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/ https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7acad-reopening-our-post-primary-schools/
DE	Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017, developed following extensive consultation with education partners, support schools to develop child protection procedures. Training resources available from PDST.	https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/d7be05-child-protection/ https://pdst.ie/ChildProtection



National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS)	Wellbeing, to ensure the area of safe and ethical use of the internet is addressed in the context of the whole-school approach to wellbeing Wellbeing for Reopening of schools	https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/af24b-wellbeing-guidance-documents-for-parents-students-and-schools/ https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/0722b-wellbeing-resources/
National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC)	A single point of information and support for young people, parents and teachers affected by bullying	www.tacklebullying.ie
School Management Bodies	Guidance to assist schools in the area of data protection legislation and provides examples, model policies, codes of practice and useful links to other resources	http://dataprotectionschools.ie/en/
The National Council for Special Education (NCSE)	The NCSE website outlines a wide range of resources suitable for children with special educational needs. It has also produced a suite of online resources 'Getting back to what we know' to support pupils with complex needs returning to school	https://ncse.ie/teacher-resources https://ncse.ie/all-online-resources https://ncse.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2020/06/Tips-for-Teachersin-supporting-Pupil-Engagement-andMotivation-during-Remote-Learning.pdf
The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)	The NCCA has developed a range of lesson plans to help students reconnect with school and each other; reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on their wellbeing and develop skills, attitudes and dispositions needed for reengaging successfully in learning	https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/backto-school-lessons-to-support-studentwellbeing
NCCA	Specific supports on provision for play in infant and junior classes is available through the Primary Language Toolkit in the 'Across all strands' section	https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Primary-Language/Primary-Language-Toolkit/?lang=en-ie



	The podcasts and videos on this section of the NCCA website focus on play in the infant classroom	https://ncca.ie/en/primary/primarydevelopments/early-years-of-primary
NCCA	The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide contains a range of resources to support learning and development of children up to the age of 6. The resources will be of use to both teachers and parents	https://www.aistearsiolta.ie/en/
The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE)	The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) has developed a variety of resources, including, articles, recorded webinars and information notes about guidance counselling, incorporating remote and online support	https://www.ncge.ie/resources
Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT)	The Junior Cycle for Teachers Support Service (JCT) is available for post primary leaders and teachers for ongoing support and advice. The JCT website is updated regularly as additional resources are developed and the JCT team can be contacted directly on info@jct.ie	http://jct.ie/home/home.php/
An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)	COGG provides a range of online resources for Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools. COGG is also supporting the development of 'Fí na Folláine', an Irish language version of 'Weaving Wellbeing' to support children at this challenging time.	https://www.cogg.ie/en/resources /
Education Centres	Education Centres will provide access for local school clusters to support very high risk pupils/students unable to attend school and support access relevant PDST resources.	https://esci.ie/education-centres.html