



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Guidance for In-School Teaching and Learning for Students attending Special Classes in Mainstream Schools

Post-Primary Schools

February 2021

Introduction

The Department recognises that schools have made significant efforts to provide effective remote learning experiences for students in mainstream classes, including those with special educational needs (SEN) who attend Special Classes. Learners with SEN who require the support of a special class are likely to have been particularly affected by the Covid 19 related school closures. The absence of school is, reportedly, having a negative impact on the lives and wellbeing of some students with SEN and on their families.

The organisation of education provision for students in special classes in post-primary schools is complex. Students enrolled in and supported by special classes present with diverse needs that occur along a wide spectrum. To meet these diverse needs schools engage in the deployment of a variety of skilled professionals including the designated special class teacher, special education teachers (SETs) and subject teachers. This guidance will make reference to an array of professionals under the collective term of teacher to encompass all who provide teaching and learning to students with SEN.

Students enrolled in special classes are returning to receive in-school teaching support from 22 February. There may be implications for timetabling to facilitate this provision, and schools will need to make flexible and responsive interim changes in its implementation. In order to support students who attend special classes the return to in-school teaching and learning should be underpinned by a gradual transitioning approach. This document is intended to guide teachers in devising a programme of lessons for these students. It should be read in conjunction with the Department's guidance document [Covid-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable reopening of Post-Primary School](#) to inform schools of the return to in-school teaching and learning in the context of Covid 19 in mainstream postprimary schools.

Aims of in-school teaching and learning

The provision of in-school support in special classes is intended to:

- Ensure a better learning experience through face-to-face engagement in teaching and learning activities
- Identify gaps in learning in order to mitigate regression in learning
- Allow for routines to be re-established and maintained to the greatest extent possible
- Support students' engagement with learning using a blended approach of faceto face teaching and by supporting access to remote lessons
- Promote wellbeing and develop resilience through promoting a sense of safety, calm, student self-efficacy and connectedness.

Teachers involved in delivering the programme of learning should engage collaboratively in planning the learning experiences.

Engaging in teaching and learning

Teachers who work with students assigned to the special class should view the phased return arrangements as an opportunity to help students re-engage with and sustain their learning, routines and social development. There should be a careful balance between formal learning and enjoyable social activities in the early phase of the return to school.

Special class teachers/SETs may be working with students for the full day. It will be desirable to provide students with opportunities to develop their learning and skills through a variety of approaches. Students should continue to be provided with broad curricular experiences in accordance with their particular needs including learning opportunities that address the identified target needs outlined in the *Student Support Plan*.

Teachers should re-familiarise themselves with and gather information on the student's individual needs from existing student support plans, other teachers and from parents/guardians. Given the wide variety of needs and abilities of students attending special classes, it is important that teachers assigned to the special class use their knowledge of the students when planning a programme of lessons. The views of parents/guardians and students should be reflected within the planning.

Students may be supported in the following ways, as appropriate:

- Special class teachers/SET providing in-class learning opportunities
- Provision of support for student to access online learning opportunities where required
- Subject teachers may teach the student(s) face-to-face in the school in place of remote lessons, where this is possible, particularly but not exclusively in practical subjects.

During this programme of lessons, teachers are encouraged to exercise flexibility to ensure that students can take part in wellbeing activities including Physical Education, SPHE and activities that promote social integration through building relationships with peers, teachers and SNAs. It is important to provide students with regular breaks to help them settle back to school. The following section outlines the importance of developing students' sense of wellbeing.

In-school support for students attending special classes

Research has identified five key principles that support resilience during times of adversity: promoting a sense of safety, calm, self-efficacy and collective efficacy, social connectedness and hope (Hobfoll et al., 2007)¹. The following guidance is based on these principles and is provided to help teachers prioritise students' key learning needs while supporting their wellbeing as they start to re-engage with in-school learning.

Promoting a sense of SAFETY

Some students, and particularly those with SEN, may be worried about re-engaging with learning activities and returning to school. Promoting a sense of safety helps students believe that their needs will be met now and in the future and that they are protected from harm.

The following can help promote a sense of safety:

- ‘Slow down to catch up’ - It is important not to rush into a focus on academic learning and ‘catching up’ before first re-establishing safety and calmness, thus ensuring students’ readiness to learn.
- It is recommended to begin with low-level learning activities and revision before introducing new materials. This will provide an opportunity to assess gaps in learning and possible areas of regression in learning.
- There should be a focus on re-establishing familiar routines in relation to school attendance and engaging in learning activities to facilitate a sense of safety for the student. It may be necessary in some instances to explicitly re-teach routines via clear and reassuring instruction.
- Teaching, modelling and consolidating the guidelines and norms which apply in the school context based on current Covid19-related public health advice (e.g. hand washing, coughing/sneezing etiquette) will be important.
- It may be helpful to use visual strategies and social stories prior to and upon return to support a sense of safety.

Promoting a sense of CALM

Some students may experience a heightened sense of anxiety about re-engaging with school. Acknowledging and addressing this anxiety will help support them to re-engage with learning and to return to school.

The following can help promote a sense of calm:

- Students should be given opportunities to communicate or share their understanding and experience of the current school closures in a safe and supportive way. These opportunities can be provided individually, in small-group sessions, (using visuals, assistive technology and other augmented communicative strategies and devices). Activities like art, baking, and role play/drama may also support students in sharing their experiences and telling their story. □ Students’ responses to school closures and stressful events are unique and varied. Some may verbalise their concerns, others may withdraw or present with challenging behaviours. It is important to recognise and acknowledge that a wide variety of reactions can be expected and these are normal reactions to abnormal events.
- Consider ways to create a calm, low-arousal environment in the classroom using, for example, lighting, music, objects such as sensory equipment, access to special interests
- Create a calm space to help students regulate using, for example, calm corners, tents, relaxation spaces, mindfulness/guided meditation, sensory activities etc.
- The opportunity to engage in quiet rhythmic activities like walking, or yoga can be calming for some students.

Promoting a sense of SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Promoting social connectedness involves having relationships with others (individual or groups) who understand you and support you. Building connections and relationships with

teachers and peers provides the basis for engagement, emotional wellbeing and readiness to learn.

The following can help promote a sense of social connectedness:

- Teachers and SNAs should take the time to re-engage and renew relationships with students by warmly welcoming them back to school, listening to them and letting them know they are there to support them.
- Creating opportunities for students to engage with creative, enjoyable, high preference activities along with SETs, SNAs and other students will be essential.

Promoting a sense of EFFICACY in SELF and COMMUNITY

Self-efficacy is the belief that you can do what you need to do, deal with challenges and handle tough times. Community efficacy is the belief that the school community you belong to can do what it needs to do to thrive and take care of its members.

The following can help promote a sense of efficacy in self and community:

- Develop a sense of self and community efficacy by encouraging students to take an active role in the class and including them in planning and delivering enjoyable group activities (e.g. art, drama, PE).
- Build on students' strengths, provide choice and include their preferences when planning activities.
- Learning activities should be developmental and tailored to students' current needs, linked to their interests, underpinned by teaching strategies which take account of the student's learning style and individual needs to enable them to experience success. Positive feedback, encouragement and affirmation will enhance a student's sense of self efficacy.
- Teaching strategies to regulate emotions and manage anxiety will help students to cope with the worries and anxieties that they may feel about the return to school. The emphasis here will be dependent on the individual needs of students and their experiences during their absence from school. Work to support students in regulating emotion and managing with anxiety should build on and complement previous work to support students in this regard as detailed in their *School Support Plan*.
- Ensure regular communication with parents/guardians to provide updates on progress and to support consistency of approaches between school and home. This communication will also provide an opportunity to include parental input when planning a programme of work/activities for students.

Promoting a sense of HOPE

A sense of hope is related to fostering resilience among students and the expectation that things will work out for them in the school community. Parents/guardians are a source of valuable information about students' experiences of learning during school closures and can flag areas of concern and successes.

The following can help promote a sense of hope:

- Teachers and SNAs should reassure students with calming, hopeful messages, about what the school, and other students are doing to make the school community a safe and happy place.
- Positive reflection on things that students participated in and enjoyed during the period of school closures should be encouraged.
- Students' return to school will involve structured, predictable separation from primary caregivers. Re-engagement with routines with an emphasis on fun, high preference learning activities can help shift the focus away from any feelings of distress and allow students to enjoy the present moment and look forward with optimism.

Resources and strategies to assist teachers to support wellbeing and meet the needs of students with SEN who are returning to school have been updated and are available on the Department of Education website [here](#). This link will also bring you to the updated version of '*Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs - (SEN) Returning to School - Strategies and Resources*'.

The Role of the Principal

The role of the principal is to lead school staff in facilitating successful outcomes for the students who are enrolled in the special class(es) and manage available resources effectively. The school buildings and facilities should be utilised flexibly to optimise the learning experiences and outcomes for students in the safest manner possible. The principal should work closely with the special class teacher/s, SETs and subject teachers to adjust timetabling in order to facilitate this provision. School leaders are best placed to make school-based decisions ensuring full-time access to education for students in special classes once this phase of schooling commences.

It is recognised that subject teachers will need to maintain their remote teaching at this time, although it may be possible for some subject teachers to attend for face-to-face learning, where appropriate and practicable. Flexible and adaptive responses to timetabling should be considered to ensure continuity of learning for all students. The school principal has the authority to make student-centred decisions with regard to deployment of SNAs in line with students identified care and medical needs.

The Role of the Special Class Teacher/s, SETs and Subject Teachers

The special class teacher in collaboration with other SETs and subject teachers who work with the special classes should collectively plan a programme of lessons. The special class teacher is best placed to lead this planning as they will be familiar with the students' identified learning profiles and *student support plans*. All teachers delivering the programme of lessons should collaboratively plan the activities and approaches. The programme should be reviewed at intervals and adjusted in accordance with students' progress. As the phased reopening of the school continues, special class teachers should make student-centred decisions, through appropriate use of assessment, to maintain a gradual return to full engagement with the students' regular curricular programme, for example, Junior Cycle, Level Two Learning Programme, Senior Cycle, Leaving Certificate Applied.

The Role of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA)

[Circular](#) 30/2014, outlines the role of an SNA in a school context. Particular reference to sections 10 and 12 of the circular may be helpful to optimise deployment of SNAs. All SNAs required to support the successful return of the special class(es) should be in school in order to support the care and medical needs of students.

The Return

Planning for the return is carried out with a specific emphasis on ensuring effective health and safety measures and in accordance with the school's Covid Response Plan. The school should make contact with the parents/guardians of students in the special class to invite their input and perspectives on their child's progress and areas of need during this transitioning phase. The principal and deputy principal/s should continue to engage with guiding and monitoring the school's provision for remote teaching from the school building, while also supporting the in-school provision.