



Guidance for School Staff on Post-Primary Students Returning to School

Introduction

Schools are re-opening and school staff are looking forward to welcoming students back. Most students will be looking forward to going back to school and meeting up with teachers, friends and classmates. While some students have enjoyed being at home, for others it may have been challenging. Some may feel a little anxious and worried about returning to school. That's normal and to be expected. Most will settle back without difficulty and schools will be there to support students and parents/guardians in this process.

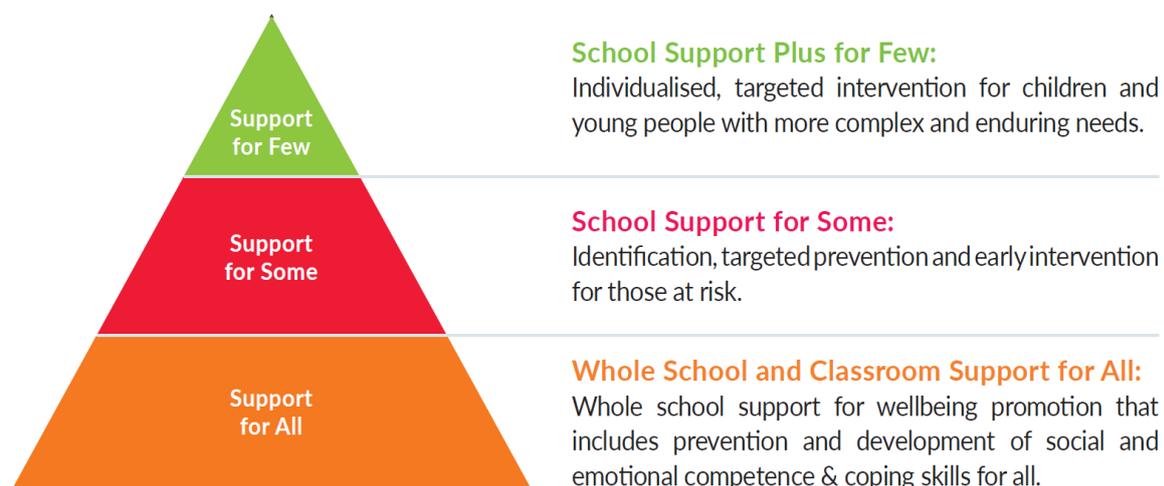
The government and schools are working hard to make sure that the school building and grounds will be safe for students and school staff. This will mean adjusting to some new routines and rules for a while to keep everyone safe.

It is important that students are supported to experience a successful transition back to school, recognising that transition is a process over time rather than a once-off event. The following information will help teachers support their students on this transition journey, acknowledging that each school community has its own unique characteristics and will therefore use this guidance to develop their own plan to support the wellbeing of their own school community.

A Continuum of Support for Transition

When schools reopen there will be changes for everyone. Students will be changing year groups and, perhaps, subject teachers. Some students will be starting their post-primary education and others will be entering examination years. All schools are different and each community will know how best to support their students in these transition processes.

The Continuum of Support framework recognises that some students will require more targeted intervention and more detailed transition plans to help them reconnect with their school community and re-engage with learning. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is available to support school staff as they implement a continuum of support for the return to school.





- **Support for All**

Whole school and classroom supports will help all students settle back into school. Getting back to a school routine and connecting with friends will help everyone adapt to their return to school. Getting enough sleep, eating healthily, taking physical exercise and taking some time to be creative are all key elements of wellbeing.

- **Support for Some/ Few**

A Continuum of Support framework recognises that some students will require more targeted or perhaps even individualised, sustained support. This includes those with identified special educational and/or additional needs. Some will have become more vulnerable as a result of their experience during Covid-19. Students with more complex needs may require an individualised approach to transition planning, applying a developmental perspective to their individual needs.

In particular, schools are advised to plan for the support of students who:

- were previously identified as having special educational and/or additional needs
- are reluctant to return to and/or attend school
- are absent or ill
- have experienced illness, bereavement and loss in their family
- and students whose behaviour seems different or out of character, or who don't settle as well as others

Actively involving students in the planning for their return to school will help reduce their worries and rebuild a sense of belonging and connection. Re-engaging with their class tutor and year head, as well as other staff such as guidance counsellor, SET, and/or SNA, will help support the transition back to school.

The Student Support Team plays a central role in co-ordinating and planning intervention for students with special educational and/or additional needs. See guidance information [here](#). It is recommended that this includes developing a support plan in collaboration with parents/guardians which identifies current strengths and needs.

For those students unable to return to school immediately (e.g. due to health concerns), ongoing distant learning supports will be required.

It is important to foster resilience in students in this time of transition. This can be achieved by promoting five key principles¹:

- A sense of safety
- A sense of calm
- A sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy
- Connectedness
- Hope

Each principle will be outlined with further information in the following.

¹ This guidance is underpinned by the framework developed by Hobfoll et al. (2007) for supporting resilience during and after traumatic events



1. Promoting a sense of SAFETY

Many students may be worried about the transition back to school in the context of Covid-19. Promoting a sense of safety helps students believe that their needs will be met and that they are protected from harm. Feeling safe helps to reduce the impact of stress and anxiety. The less stressed we are, the more we are able to think, plan, engage and learn.

The following can help promote a sense of safety:



Process of re-integration

It will take time for schools to adjust and for students to settle back into school. For many students, re-establishing basic routines may be difficult. Apart from re-engaging with learning and study routines, students must re-establish everyday routines related to sleep, morning schedules, and following a timetable. Not all students will be ready or able to engage with learning tasks immediately. Some may have suffered separation from, or loss of a family member. Others may have had to take on caring roles and may continue to feel anxious about family members on return to school.

It is important that staff recognise that the student cohort will be made up of individuals with very different experiences of the pandemic and that this may affect their readiness to learn on return to school. Giving students time to re-integrate to school at their own pace will help them to feel more secure after a long period of uncertainty.

Slow down to catch up

It is important that teachers and school staff do not rush into a focus on academic learning. First, ensure that students feel safe and have a chance to 'catch up' with their friends, teachers and other school staff. A focus on student wellbeing and belonging will enhance their readiness to engage in learning.

It may be helpful to begin with material taught via remote learning before commencing new topics. This will allow those who were able to engage with the material time to revise and consolidate their knowledge on the topic, while also providing a learning opportunity to those who were less able to engage with remote learning.

Routines

Predictable routines create a sense of psychological safety. Re-establishing routines will contribute to a safe and calm learning environment, giving students a sense that things are returning to normal. It will be important to model and teach the new routines necessary for students to return to school. It will also be important to prepare students for any possible changes to the classrooms and school environment. For example, they may have to wash their hands more or use hand sanitiser as they move between classrooms. It is important that this information is shared ahead of school reopening via the school website/newsletter etc, as well as being reiterated on the first day back. For students with special educational and/or additional needs, this could include the use of a social story and/or other visual approaches to help them understand new safety routines and changes to the physical environment.



Emotional comfort and support

Teachers can support students' emotional needs and sense of safety through careful observation, listening to students' concerns and acknowledging their feelings. Ask students what you can do to help and let them know that you understand it is hard for them. Offer kindness and comfort and provide a quiet place for students to talk to school staff if they wish. If further help is required, ensure that you are aware of how to seek additional support for a student through the student support team in your school.

2. Promoting a sense of CALM

Some students may experience a heightened sense of anxiety about returning to school in the context of Covid-19. Acknowledging and addressing their worries will help support this transition. A sense of calm gives students the ability to be at peace in mind and body. Being able to relax and stay composed helps us all to focus and concentrate on what we need to do.



The following can help promote a sense of calm:

Before students return

Support parents/guardians

Reassure and reconnect with parents/guardians. Share clear information about changes in routines/rules, wellbeing supports, and other strategies to help students returning to school. Pay particular attention to those who may be more vulnerable, including those with special educational and/or additional needs. Acknowledge uncertainty and seek to address any concerns or worries by phone, email or virtual meetings. Highlight support systems within the school, such as the Student Support Team, who will continue to support the wellbeing of all students.

Convey affirming messages

Offer calming, hopeful messages to parents/guardians and students. *'We are working hard to make sure that the school building and school grounds will be safe for all of the students and school staff'* and *'We are looking forward to seeing everyone'*.

Plan ahead

Identify students who have known and emerging needs and plan for them in line with the Continuum of Support framework.

When students return

Normalise students' responses to Covid-19

Students will have had different experiences during school closure. Each student's response to stressful events is unique. Some may verbalise their concerns, others may



withdraw or present with behaviours of concern. It is important to acknowledge that a wide variety of reactions can be expected

These are normal reactions to abnormal events.

Allow students time to talk

Students should be given opportunities to talk about the pandemic in a safe, supported way. It should be highlighted to all students which members of staff are available to speak with them, along with how to make contact with them. Listening to students and supporting them to share their experiences can promote a sense of calm. This can also help them to normalise feelings and process changes they have experienced. Some may not wish to share their thoughts and experiences in a group setting and may be more comfortable to talk about these in a one-to-one setting with the school Guidance Counsellor or pastoral staff. See *Guidelines for Teachers: Listen Connect Model Teach*.

Support students in their efforts to self-regulate

School staff should model emotional regulation themselves in responding sensitively to individual needs. This will help students to learn how to self-calm and manage their worries. It will be important to acknowledge students' feelings and support them to problem-solve and cope with their thoughts and feelings. Many will benefit from [relaxation techniques](#) and calming activities, such as mindfulness, drawing, physical activity, music, and relaxation/breathing.

Some students may require more individualised approaches to help them stay calm and regulated. They may need frequent movement breaks or support to understand, label and communicate their emotions. See *Managing Stress and Anxiety: A Guide for Students*.

Review the physical environment

Consider ways to create a calm environment in the school, for example, the use of lighting, music, displays in classrooms and on corridors, and use of calming colours. Some students may choose to access a space to help them regulate and calm (e.g., relaxation space, meditation corner, access to sensory materials). While there will be changes to the physical environment in the context of public health advice, it is important that students also experience a sense of familiarity, routine and structure, particularly for those students with special educational and/or additional needs.

Reflect

It is important that you remain positive and calm; your students will pick up on how you are feeling on your return to school and how you feel about any curriculum demands. Be mindful of the language you use in relation to state exams. Assure your students that they will cope and that you are there to help.



3. Promoting a sense of SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

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.

This is particularly important when many students have experienced loss of connection with friends and teachers as a result of school closures.

The following can help promote a sense of social connectedness:

Prioritise relationships

The presence of supportive, caring adults is central to supporting students' recovery from challenging events in their life. Social support and connections act as buffers against stress. Teachers may be understandably eager to focus on 'curricular catch up', particularly for students taking State Examinations in 2021. However, it is important to first take the time to re-engage with students, to build relationships and connections. Only then will students be ready and available to participate in a meaningful way. It is natural for students and teachers to be anxious to get course work covered but for some young people, this anxiety may become overwhelming.

It is important to identify a key adult who will reach out to vulnerable students. It is through their connections with others that these students will learn to effectively manage this transition. Help them feel genuinely cared for, listened to and included. Some students with additional needs will require targeted intervention such as peer or adult support system whilst adhering to physical distancing guidance. Small group and structured activities involving SPHE, social skills groups or lunchtime clubs can also help students to build connections and re-establish relationships.

Be creative

Aim to build relationships and connections through creative opportunities across the school community. Ease into work with discussions and sharing stories and experiences through drama, music and visual arts. There may be a prominent place in the school which students could use to display art or written work recounting their experiences of Covid-19. This will build a sense of connectedness and community spirit and efficacy.

Create a sense of a school community

Give young people responsibility and involve them in planning activities that create a sense of belonging and efficacy. Give students a voice in the school and encourage them to contribute to decisions around rules, classroom organisation and routines. Encourage and support engagement in the student council early in the year to promote

I am part of my year group and school. I have a voice and I am listened to

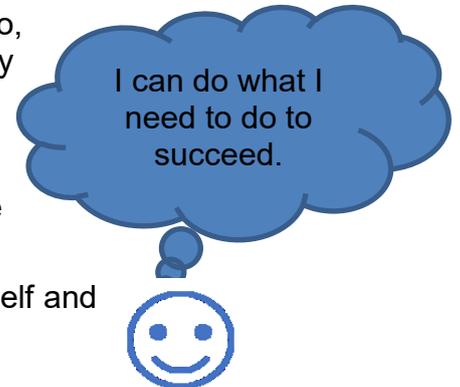




involvement in the transition process. Promote the use of language such as ‘our year’, ‘our project’, and ‘our school’.

4. 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. As a result of the Covid-19 crisis, some people may feel a lack of control and may doubt their ability to solve problems and handle ordinary day-to-day challenges.



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

Information and/or training for staff

Professional development for staff to build knowledge and awareness of how best to support the wellbeing of students on return to school will be useful. For information on training refer to the DES CPD Directory.

It may be helpful for school staff (both teaching and non-teaching) to have information about stress reactions shown by young people and guidance on how to engage in discussions and answer students’ questions. See *The Response to Stress: Information for School Staff*.

Teacher wellbeing and self-care

As with students, school staff will have had different experiences of the pandemic. Everyone will need time to adjust to the ‘new normal’. It is important to show compassion and kindness to ourselves and others. Not all individuals will respond to stress in the same way and each person will have their own unique coping mechanisms which will vary from time to time. It is especially important that teachers are proactive in looking after their own wellbeing and self-care. Student wellbeing is influenced by the wellbeing of the adults around them; it is important that adults model positive ways of coping with their own emotions. Further information on teacher wellbeing and self-care is available [here](#)

School staff will benefit from:

- Dedicated time for staff reorientation and preparation prior to students’ return.
- Strategies to build staff wellbeing and resilience.
- Knowing how and where to get help. See information on the DES Employment Assistance Service - [Spectrum life](#).

Encourage student voice and agency

During school closures, many young people will have enjoyed new experiences and learned new skills. Others may have experienced difficult circumstances and loss. It is important to create opportunities for young people to tell their stories.

Involving students in identifying and responding to their needs will strengthen their



sense of belonging and help reduce anxiety. This includes engaging students in setting targets, drawing on their preferences and interests, providing choice, where possible, and supporting them to have a voice in school decisions.

Encourage problem-solving

Students can be supported to identify what they have done in the past that helped them to cope in challenging situations. This develops their awareness of a range of coping skills and gives them confidence to know they have coped with difficult situations and can again.

5. Promoting a sense of HOPE

A sense of hope is related to fostering resiliency and the expectation that things will work out for students in the school community. Hope also includes a belief that others will be there to help.

The following can help promote a sense of hope:



Emphasise strengths, hope, and positivity

Schools provide opportunities for students to feel safe, secure, and hopeful about the present and future. Teachers can talk about how people came together locally and nationally and found creative solutions to overcome challenges during the pandemic. Talking about these examples of resilience can be healing and reassuring for both students and adults. Teachers can support young people to identify their own strengths, and the new skills they may have developed during this time. Students can draw on these to develop coping strategies if they feel anxious, nervous or down. The SPHE curriculum may be helpful in brainstorming ideas for a coping plan.

Encouraging young people and families to resume activities

Returning to familiar extra-curricular activities can support the transition process and help young people to feel life is returning to normal. This can shift the focus away from feelings of worry and allow students to enjoy the present moment while looking forward with optimism to their return to other activities. This increases emotional strength and resilience and demonstrates that change and growth can occur despite adversity.

Hope about the future

For the incoming Leaving Certificate Students, some are likely to be feeling very anxious about having missed out on teaching time during school closures. Indeed, teachers are also likely to feel anxious about covering curricular content and preparing their students for next year's examinations. It is important that these students are enabled to feel hopeful about their upcoming examinations, and to feel secure in the knowledge that their teachers are there to support them. It is also important for teachers and students to acknowledge that **all** Leaving Certificate students will be in the same situation and may be experiencing the same issues and anxieties.

Incoming 1st Year Pupils – Consider the following

Some 1st Year students who will begin post-primary school in September 2020 may



find the transition difficult, having missed out on some of the usual ceremonies and rites of passage associated with finishing 6th Class. Students will have been supported by both schools and their parents/guardians in preparing for this transition. The guidance documents for parents/guardians and primary school staff for managing the transition during Covid-19 school closures can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

All students should have a completed **Education Passport** on enrolment in their new post-primary school. Some students with special educational and/or additional needs may also have further **transition documentation** sent from their primary school, with parent/guardian consent. It will be important that students identified as vulnerable or potentially vulnerable are highlighted to staff who will be supporting them.

Incoming 1st year students with **special educational and/or additional needs** will require more detailed information about what post-primary school will look like and what to expect. Social stories and other visual approaches can be used to help prepare and teach these students about physical distancing and hygiene etiquette required.

1st year students, will need more time than usual in the first few weeks to help them adjust to their new school. They may have missed out on visits to the school and may require additional support around navigating the school building, reading timetables and organising their books/lockers. NEPS [Organisational Tips](#) may be a good starting point for helping students to organise themselves.

If a student presents with difficulties during the initial transition phase and has not been previously identified as requiring additional support, it may be helpful for their needs to be considered by the **Student Support Team**. This should lead to further engagement with the student and/or their parents/guardians in providing school-based support, as appropriate.

It is also important that students know who they can speak to in their new school if they have a concern or worry. Relationships or connections with key adults in the post-primary school will facilitate effective transition for students with additional needs. For example, it would be most helpful if these students could meet a link person from the post-primary school virtually in advance of the transition (e.g. SET teacher/class tutor) to provide reassurance and answer any questions they might have. Consider assigning a named contact person for parents/guardians of students with additional needs.

Making new friends is often cited as a key concern for students with special educational needs during the transition to post-primary school. It would also be helpful for post-primary schools to be mindful of friendship groups for vulnerable students when assigning classes. Social stories and/or role play/modelling can be used to provide support around how to make and maintain new friendships, as well as a buddy or peer mentoring system.

Additional resources:

Schools may find the following guidance and resources useful in supporting the transition back to school:

- Return to Schooling – Curriculum guidance for post primary school leaders and teachers , Department of Education and Skills.



- The National Council for Special Education [resources](#) to support students with SEN on transitioning back to school.
- Middletown Centre for Autism [resources and webinars](#) which may assist in meeting the needs of students with autism including strategies to support their return to school.