



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

Reconnecting with Education

Guidance for post-primary schools
for students at risk of early school
leaving

1. Introduction

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic the Department of Education and Skills (DES) has identified as an objective that all students should return to education as normal to the fullest extent possible, while minimising the risks from a public health perspective. The Department also recognises that in some cases, this may be more difficult for particular students.

Ireland currently has one of the highest retention rates in Europe for post-primary education¹. This is in no small measure due to the work done in schools to minimise early school leaving. However, during the school year 2019/20, post-primary students experienced unprecedented disruption to their education due to the global pandemic. In July 2020 the ESRI published [research](#) suggesting that the social and educational inequalities evident in the lives of some children and young people in the pre-Covid 19 period are likely to amplify in the wake of the pandemic. Those from more disadvantaged backgrounds returning to school are likely to have suffered greater levels of learning loss. The ESRI study concluded that there is a risk that some of those who were not highly engaged in school before the closures may not re-engage at all in full-time education.

Ireland, along with all other EU Member States, signed up to the *Youth Guarantee*² in 2013. This is a commitment to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. This guidance document is grounded in that commitment to young people and details how schools can adopt a co-ordinated and aligned approach by working with Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and ETBs to signpost further education options for those who do not return to school this year.

While the primary objective of the Department is to support schools in encouraging students to return to school to complete their education, it is acknowledged that some students will choose not to reengage with their post-primary education. The purpose of this guidance is to support schools in encouraging students to return to school to complete their education, and/or to outline options such as alternative pathways to further education or employment. Students will be supported in reconnecting and continuing with their education with the assistance of Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), or on a pathway to further education, training or apprenticeship with the assistance of guidance counsellors and local ETBs.

¹ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/ireland_leaving_education_early.pdf

² <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en>

2. Procedures for identifying and engaging with students at risk of early school leaving

Schools are accustomed to supporting students to ensure they are retained in the education system. In light of the possible effects of school closure on retaining young people who were already experiencing difficulty in attending school, schools are asked to renew their efforts to support those students. A coordinated approach to this support, involving post-primary schools, is essential. TESS has recently communicated to all schools its commitment to supporting schools and families so that all students can return to school. In order to ensure support is targeted where most needed, schools are requested to identify and engage with students at risk of early school leaving as a matter of priority.

Students who are at risk of early school leaving fall into two distinct categories:

- Students who must legally attend school (those under the age of 16 or who have completed less than three years' post-primary education)
- Students who have completed Junior Cycle and are over the age of 16.

Every effort should be made by school personnel to encourage students in both categories to return to school. A flowchart to support decision-making around the options for these students is included in Appendix 1.

2.1 Identification of personnel involved in providing support to students at risk of early school leaving

Each post-primary school should involve key members of the staff such as the student support team, year heads, Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) co-ordinators, School Completion Programme (SCP) personnel and/or guidance counsellor(s), as appropriate, to assist in the early identification of students at risk of early school leaving.

2.2 Identification of students at risk of early school leaving

The school should then identify any students (1st year to 6th year) who are at risk of early school leaving and, in so doing, should consider:

- Students and/or their parents/guardians who, prior to the start of the academic year, have indicated their intention not to return to complete post-primary education
- Incoming first years who have enrolled in a post-primary school but failed to attend and whose parents/guardians do not make contact with the school
- Students in second to sixth year who have not returned to post-primary school
- Schools have been requested to submit a COVID-19 related return to TESS by **16 October 2020** identifying all students who have not returned to school following the passing of 20 school days, since the commencement of the new school year 2020/2021 (regardless of age).

2.3 Initial contact with students/parents/guardians

Once these students have been identified, a member(s) of the student support team/school staff should make initial contact with the student or parents/guardians. This person should ideally have an established good relationship with the family/student, for example, a year

head, guidance counsellor, HSCL co-ordinator or other staff member. The purpose of this initial contact is to:

- Establish the reasons for the student not engaging with or returning to schooling
- Offer support and assistance to encourage and promote a return to or re-engagement with education
- Offer students who are over 16 years of age an opportunity to meet the guidance counsellor to discuss the reasons for non-engagement, the possible implications for their future careers and education opportunities should they choose to leave school early, and to explore current education, training and career options available.

For incoming first years or students transferring from another school who fail to attend or whose parents/guardians fail to make contact, and whose parents/guardians are not known to the school, the school should contact the student's previous school and seek their advice in making contact with the student/parents/guardians. Section 20 of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 specifies how schools should establish and maintain registers – see Appendix 2.

3. Supporting students at risk of early school leaving

Every effort should be made by the school to encourage students to return to school or engage in an alternative full-time education or training programme. Schools should make a plan for a return to the school or re-engagement with education which should be agreed with all the relevant parties, including the student and the parents/guardians if the student is under 18. The plan should be monitored by the staff responsible for supporting students at risk of early school leaving and adjusted as needed. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has developed a suite of resources for teachers, parents and students to support the whole school community in the new school year. Further details can be found [here](#) and in Appendix 3.

Where initial efforts have not resulted in a student's return to school, HSCL Co-ordinators and/or School Completion Programme (SCP) personnel, where available, can provide additional support. The role of HSCL co-ordinators and SCP personnel should be carried out in consultation and collaboration with principals and other relevant staff and support agencies, as follows:

- HSCL co-ordinators will liaise with the student and his/her family to support a return to school in the first instance, with subsequent referral to the Educational Welfare Service (EWS) for support and assistance if required. In consultation and collaboration with principals and existing school supports, HSCL coordinators will liaise with parents of students who are finding it hard to re-engage, offering support and information. HSCL coordinators can also play a key role in facilitating communication between the school and in accessing support from relevant student and family support services.
- SCP personnel will provide one-to-one and small-group targeted brief interventions to support students who are finding it hard to re-engage. This targeted support will be designed to address the specific needs of individuals and may include interventions to address anxiety and the use of motivational interviewing techniques. Progress will be monitored, and decisions about onward referral for specific supports will be made.

In schools that do not have HSCL or SCP support, a designated educational welfare officer (EWO) can be contacted for support and assistance. Where students have not returned despite the schools' best efforts, EWOs will liaise with school principals and staff, and will offer advice and support to those students and their parents. Contact details for TESS services and EWOs are listed in Appendix 4.

The details below outline how schools can support students from the two categories listed in section 2.

3.1: Students of all ages who agree to return to school

Where the engagement between the school and the student/parents/guardians results in the student returning to school, the school should, in consultation with the student, establish the student's learning needs and how best to support him/her in their return to school. This will enable the provision of individualised support for the student and will also be important in meeting their priority learning needs. Schools will need to ensure that they have appropriate

systems or structures in place to continue to support the students as they re-engage with school. Approaches will vary depending on the age of the student and the stage of the year the student is reintegrated into school.

It is important that the ongoing needs of these students are supported throughout the school year through the existing school structures such as the whole-school guidance programme. Guidance counsellors can play an important role in providing support and reassurance to students experiencing anxiety about starting or returning to school.

3.2 Students who must legally attend school (those under the age of 16 or who have completed less than 3 years post-primary education)

Where schools have implemented all internal processes, and despite the efforts of HSCL and SCP where available, students who are under the age of 16 years, or have not completed three years of second-level education, whichever is the later, must be referred to the educational welfare officer (EWO) if they do not return to school. The EWO will offer advice and support to those students and their parents/guardians.

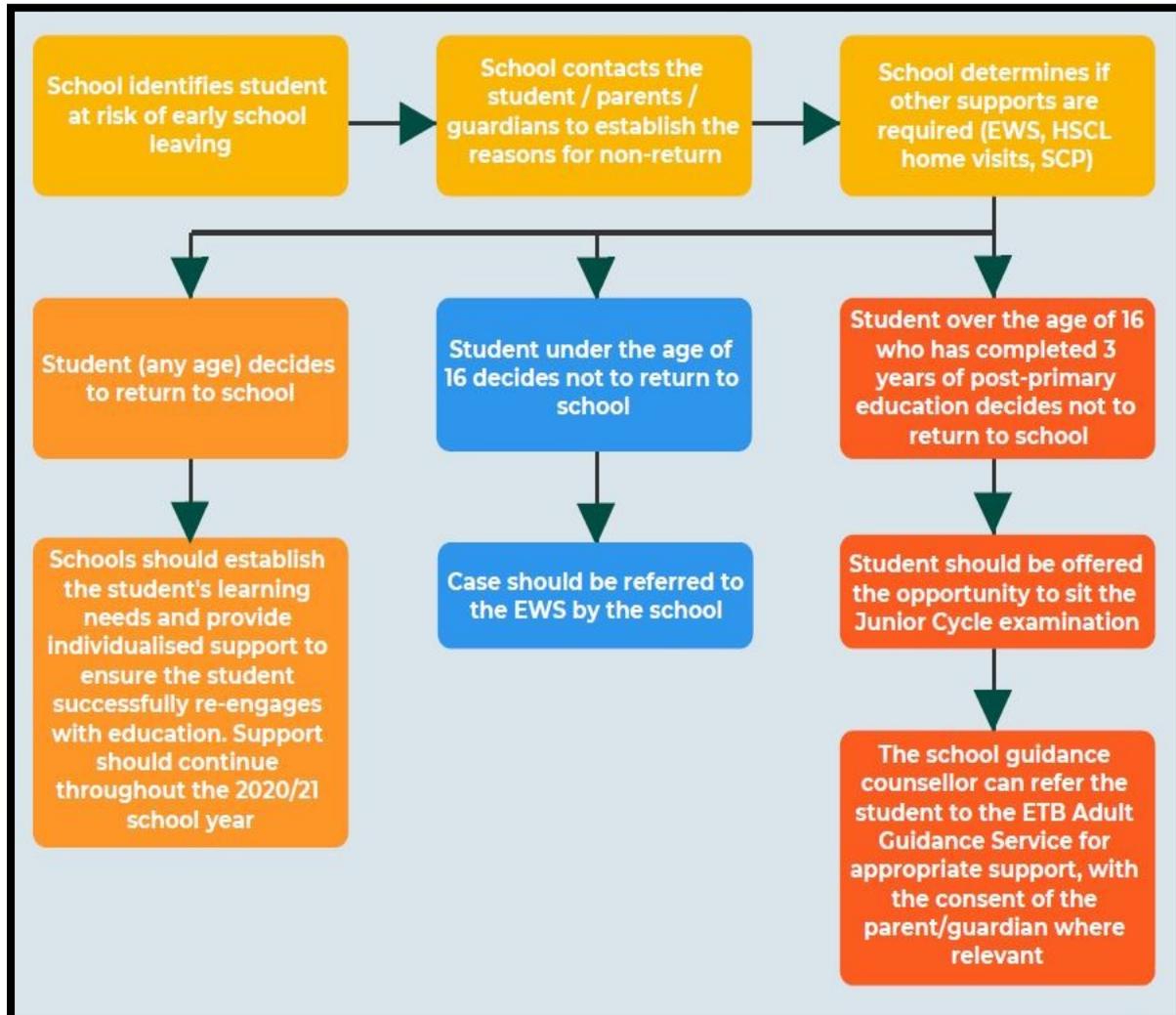
Schools should make every effort to work with parents of students in this category and to advise them of the supports available to them from TESS in facilitating their child's return to school. Students who were due to sit the Junior Cycle examinations in June 2020 but who are not continuing in formal education should be informed about the opportunity to sit the rescheduled Junior Cycle examinations should they wish to do so. Only in the exceptional case where a student has completed Junior Cycle and has made a firm decision not to continue in mainstream school should the alternative pathways be presented as a more viable option. These options could be explored through ETBs for students over 16 years.

3.3 Students who have completed Junior Cycle, are over the age of 16, and do not return to school

Where schools have implemented all internal processes and, despite the efforts of HSCL and SCP where available, students who are **over the age of 16 years** should be offered an opportunity to meet with the school guidance counsellor to discuss the implications of early school leaving and to explore the possible education, training and career options available.

These students should, in the first instance, be offered the opportunity to sit the Junior Cycle examinations. Guidance counsellors can refer the student to the local ETB Adult Educational Guidance Service, with the consent of the parent/guardian for students under 18 (or the students themselves if over 18). The ETB Adult Education Guidance Service can support early school leavers by connecting them with other education and training providers in the local area, including the Youthreach programme, and by signposting alternative pathways in education, apprenticeship training and the world of work. ETB Contact details are listed in Appendix 5.

Appendix 1: Flowchart to support decision-making



Appendix 2: Section 20 of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000

20.—(1) The principal of a recognised school shall, as soon as may be after the commencement of this section, cause to be established and maintained a register of all students attending that school.

(2) The principal of a recognised school shall, on the day on which the child first attends that school, enter the child's name, the date of his or her first so attending and such other particulars as may be prescribed by the Minister, in the register maintained under this section in respect of that school, and the child concerned shall, for the purposes of this Act, be deemed, as on and from that date, to be registered in that school.

(3) The principal of a recognised school shall, as soon as may be after entering in the register maintained under this section in respect of that school the name of a child who is registered in another recognised school, so inform by notification in writing the principal of the second-mentioned school.

(4) The principal of the second-mentioned school referred to in *subsection (3)* shall, on receipt of a notification under that subsection, remove the name of the child concerned from the register maintained under this section in respect of the said second-mentioned school except where the child continues to receive part of his or her education at that school.

(5) The principal of a recognised school shall, on receiving a notification under *subsection (3)* in relation to a child, notify the principal of the school first-mentioned in that subsection of—

(a) any problems relating to school attendance that the child concerned had while attending the second-mentioned school referred to therein, and

(b) such other matters relating to the child's educational progress as he or she considers appropriate.

(6) The principal of a recognised school shall not remove a child's name from the register other than—

(a) in accordance with *subsection (4)*, or

(b) where he or she has received a notification in writing from the Board that the child concerned is registered in the register maintained under *section 14*.

Appendix 3: Supports for schools

- **Tusla Education Support Service (TESS):** TESS comprises three strands: the Statutory Educational Welfare Service (EWS), and the two DEIS school support services – the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP). TESS will initially focus on the welfare aspect of its work, taking a global approach to troubleshooting issues and supporting the students' return to school in partnership with schools, families, children and young people.

The staff across all TESS strands, HSCL, SCP and EWS, will work systematically throughout September and October 2020 to ensure that children and young people receive support in relation to their return to education and school attendance. TESS staff will support school personnel to follow up on attendance issues by providing guidance and signposting appropriate support services and referral pathways. When initial supports have been exhausted, TESS will work with schools and families in relation to patterns of non-attendance which require specific intervention from TESS.

- **National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS):** NEPS psychologists work with both primary and post-primary schools and are concerned with students' learning, behaviour, and social and emotional development. Each psychologist is assigned to a group of schools.

NEPS psychologists specialise in working with the school community. They work in partnership with teachers, parents and children in identifying educational needs. They offer a range of services aimed at meeting these needs; for example, by supporting individual students (through consultation and assessment), by undertaking special projects and through research.

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/National-Educational-Psychological-Service-NEPS-/NEPS-Home-Page.html>

- **Youthreach** is part of a national ETB programme of second-chance education and training. The aim of Youthreach is to help young people in the 15 to 20 age group to make the transition from school to work through the provision of co-ordinated foundation training, education and work experience. It includes a considerable amount of personal development and exploration where participants needs, interests and capacities are fully taken into account. The programme usually provides two years integrated education, training and work experience. Basic skills training, practical work training and general education are features of the programme, and the application of new technology is integrated into all aspects of programme content.

There is a strong emphasis on personal development, on the core skills of literacy and numeracy and on communications and IT, along with a choice of vocational options and a work experience programme. The programme offers participants the opportunity to identify and pursue viable options in adult life, and provides them with opportunities to acquire certification. Youthreach includes a work experience element to prepare participants for progression to further study, training or to working life. The Youthreach programme is generally full time, although part-time courses can be arranged. Courses generally last from one to two years although this can be flexible, depending on individual needs.

The Youthreach programme is provided by ETBs through the 110 Youthreach Centres and 35 Community Training Centres nationwide, mostly located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Details in relation to the provision of Youthreach in a particular area can be found at: <https://www.etbi.ie/youthreach>

- **National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE):** The mission of the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) is to develop and support quality guidance provision in the education sector as part of lifelong learning in accordance with national and international best practice. NCGE provides guidelines on good practice in the provision of whole-school guidance. The Whole School Guidance Framework outlines the delivery of guidance to ensure targeted approaches for students with particular needs. NCGE works closely with ETBs in the delivery of quality guidance in the further education and training sector through the Adult Educational Guidance Services.

<https://www.ncge.ie/>

<https://www.ncge.ie/resources/ncge-whole-school-guidance-framework>

- **ETB Adult Educational Guidance Services (AEGS):** The ETB AEGS provide impartial careers and education information to adults (and young people aged over 16 years who have left school with low or no formal qualifications or low literacy levels) who wish to return to education and training, to make informed educational, career and life choices.

Guidance is provided in group settings and on a one-to-one basis for those who require further supports – to identify clients own lifelong learning and career plan.

<https://www.ncge.ie/ncge/aegi-contact-details>

Appendix 4: Relevant Contacts for Tusla Education Support Service (TESS)

For contact phone numbers please see - https://www.tusla.ie/get-in-touch/education-and-welfare/	
CAVAN/MONAGHAN	Georgina Traynor Georgina.traynor@tusla.ie
CITY OF DUBLIN	Clare Garrett Clare.garrett@tusla.ie
CORK	Sinead O'Flynn Sinead.oflynn@tusla.ie
DONEGAL	David Bradley David.bradley@tusla.ie
DUBLIN / DUN LAOGHAIRE (Fingal & North County Dublin)	Marian Horan Marian.horan@tusla.ie
DUBLIN / DUN LAOGHAIRE (Dun Laoghaire & South County Dublin)	Michael McCabe Michael.mccabe@tusla.ie
GALWAY / ROSCOMMON	Emma Fahy Emma.fahy@tusla.ie
KERRY	Sinead O'Flynn Sinead.oflynn@tusla.ie
KILDARE / WICKLOW	Amanda Cullen Amanda.cullen@tusla.ie
KILKENNY / CARLOW	Sheila Clarke Sheila.clarke@tusla.ie
LAOIS / OFFALY	Bernadette Mohan Bernadette.mohan@tusla.ie
LIMERICK / CLARE	Miriam Gleeson miriam.gleeson@tusla.ie
LONGFORD / WESTMEATH	Bernadette Mohan Bernadette.mohan@tusla.ie
LOUTH / MEATH	Georgina Traynor Georgina.traynor@tusla.ie
MAYO /SLIGO / LEITRIM	David Bradley David.bradley@tusla.ie
TIPPERARY	Miriam Gleeson miriam.gleeson@tusla.ie
WATERFORD / WEXFORD	Sheila Clarke Sheila.clarke@tusla.ie

Appendix 5: ETB Contact details by region

Education and Training Board	FET Director	FET Contact email	Adult Education and Guidance (Regional contact details available at link below)
Cavan & Monaghan	Linda Pinkster	lindapinkster@cmetb.ie	http://www.cmetbadultguidance.ie/
City of Dublin	Ann Gilton	ann.gilton@cdetb.ie	http://cityofdublin.etb.ie/adult-education-guidance-service/
	Blake Hodkinson	blake.hodkinson@cdetb.ie	
Cork	John Fitzgibbon	john.fitzgibbons@corketb.ie	https://www.corketb.ie/about-cork-etb/further-education-training-f-e-t/adult-education-guidance-initiative/
Donegal	Crona Gallagher	cronagallagher@donegaletb.ie	https://www.donegaletb.ie/further-education-training/learner-information/
Dublin & Dun Laoghaire	Caitriona Murphy	caitriamurphy@ddletb.ie	http://dublinadulteducation.ie/adult-guidance/
Galway & Roscommon	Eithne Nic Dhonnchadha	eithne.nicdhonnchadha@gretb.ie	https://gretb.ie/further-education-training/adult-guidance-and-information-service/
Kerry	Stephen Goulding (acting)	directorfet@kerryetb.ie	https://www.kerryetb.ie/further-education-training/learner-information-guidance-and-support/
Kildare & Wicklow	Ken Seery	kenseery@kwetb.ie	http://kildarewicklow.etb.ie/further-education/fet-guidance-service/
Kilkenny & Carlow	Martha Bolger	martha.bolger@kkadulthood.ie	http://kilkennycarlow.etb.ie/further-education-and-training/adult-education-guidance-service/
Laois & Offaly	Tony Dalton	tdalton@loetb.ie	https://www.loetb.ie/adult-guidance
Limerick & Clare	Paul Patton	paul.patton@lcteb.ie	https://lcteb.ie/further-education-and-training-division/
Longford & Westmeath	Antonine Healy	ahealy@lwebt.ie	http://longfordwestmeath.etb.ie/further-education-training/guidance/
Louth & Meath	Sadie Ward McDermott	smcdermott@lmetb.ie	https://www.lmetb.ie/adult-education/adult-guidance-service/
Mayo, Sligo & Leitrim	Peter Egan	peteregan@msletb.ie	https://msletb.ie/further-education-and-training-fet/need-help-advice/
Tipperary	Colin Cummins	ccummins@tipperaryetb.ie	http://tipperary.etb.ie/further-education/adult-guidance-in-education-service/
Waterford & Wexford	Ken Whyte	kenwhyte@wwebt.ie	http://waterfordwexford.etb.ie/adult-education-services/adult-educational-guidance-services/