



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS)

Guidance for Post-Primary Schools

September 2021

Introduction

This guidance from the Department of Education provides post-primary schools with a framework for providing a suite of supports for students who have been most impacted by Covid. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the Department's Circular Letter 0045/2021 Covid Learning and **Support Scheme**: <https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/aec0a-covid-learning-and-support-scheme/>

Additional teaching resources are being provided to post-primary schools, as a once-off temporary allocation, for the 2021/2022 school year. Additional Covid-targeted teaching hours are being provided to each recognised school, from which schools can provide additional teaching support for students who, in their view, are at increased risk of learning loss and/or at risk of early school leaving and/or educational disadvantage resulting from the impact of Covid.

The desired outcomes are that schools will implement measures to mitigate the impact of Covid-related school closures in 2020 and 2021 and that students will be supported in improving their wellbeing and to address issues associated with learning loss so that they may engage fully with learning in the 2021/2022 school year.

This guidance is being provided for schools in order to specify how the additional teaching hours should be used, as well as providing details of appropriate control and oversight measures required of schools.

Rationale for CLASS programme

Schools were closed over two periods in 2020 and 2021 and although priority was afforded to the re-opening of schools and special education provision at the earliest possible dates, there has been disruption to in-school learning over two school years.

Schools made very good efforts to provide remote teaching and learning during school closures. However, some students, particularly those with special educational needs and those most at risk of educational disadvantage, may have experienced the impact of school closures in a very significant way. This impact is likely to have been further compounded by the loss of connectedness with school routines and engagement with teaching and learning.

In the school year 2021/2022, schools are being encouraged through the extra resources provided under the CLASS programme, to support students who have been most impacted by the disruption of the previous two school years.

Aims of CLASS programme

The provision of extra supports is intended to enable schools to:

- Provide additional targeted teaching support for students who have struggled most during the period of school closures, including those with more complex special educational needs and those most at risk of educational disadvantage
- Provide access to additional teaching support for other students who, as a result of the impact of Covid, now require a short, targeted intervention to help them to re-engage with school, learning and peers
- Identify and meet the gaps in learning, in skills, in readiness to learn or in the students' previously identified priority learning needs in order to mitigate any potential regression in learning
- Allow for good routines to be re-established and maintained to the greatest extent possible so that all students can learn effectively
- Equip students with the necessary skills to experience success in learning throughout the school day
- Support co-curricular and extra-curricular activities to redress the negative impact on students' wellbeing and to continue to foster a sense of safety, calm, efficacy and connectedness
- Support students, where necessary, in regaining the confidence needed to participate fully in learning and to realise their potential.

Which students should be supported through the CLASS scheme?

Students who should be supported through the CLASS scheme are those who have been most affected by Covid.

In previous school years, schools will already have identified and prioritised a number of students for extra supports to meet wellbeing and additional learning needs. In this school year, it can be expected that a number of students who have not previously been identified as needing extra support may come to the fore. The scope of CLASS may therefore extend beyond students with SEN and it is important that schools take time to identify ALL students who have emerging needs arising from the impact of Covid. These students may include those who have already been identified and newly-identified students with emerging needs due to the impact of Covid.

How can schools identify student need?

Schools have a number of effective systems and processes in place to identify students who need additional support, at various stages throughout their time in school. A school's Student Support Team, which includes special education teachers (SETs), will already have well-established whole-school collaborative processes in place for the identification of students across the *Continuum of Support* framework. The *Continuum of Support* framework and the *Student Support File* process are already used in schools to assist in the identification of student needs, and as a problem-solving model of assessment and intervention that enables

schools to gather and analyse data, as well as to plan and review the progress of individual students, as per the *Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*, which is available at <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Special-Education/Guidelines-for-Post-Primary-Schools-Supporting-Students-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-Mainstream-Schools.pdf>

Each school should use the problem-solving approaches outlined in these guidelines to assist with the process of identifying those students who require the additional supports provided by the CLASS programme.

This problem-solving process is illustrated as follows:



Some students who may not have been identified as requiring or benefitting from support pre-Covid, might now, for a variety of reasons, benefit from access to additional teaching supports, which can be provided through the CLASS programme. The reasons for providing such supports are many and varied, and dependent on individual student needs and circumstances.

Teachers' knowledge of their students is central to the identification of student need, together with parental knowledge of their children and the voice of students themselves. A collaborative approach between subject teachers, SETs, other members of the Student Support Team, special needs assistants (SNAs), parents, students, and others, is therefore necessary to identify student need, across the *Continuum of Support* framework. Needs might be identified based on a variety of factors and might include, but are not limited to:

- An assessed and/or identified special educational need
- Wellbeing needs including social, emotional and/or behavioural needs, student self-esteem and self-confidence
- Curricular access needs
- Addressing feelings of isolation, anxiety levels, literacy and numeracy needs

- Disengagement from learning, particularly due to the COVID pandemic and consequent disruption to learning.

Schools will have already identified a list of those students with identified special or additional learning needs, those most at risk of educational disadvantage, and those who have struggled to engage or reengage with school. Through whole-school collaborative processes, the school should review the available data regarding the level of engagement, attendance and participation rates of all students during school closures, and their reopening. Through this process, schools may identify students with emerging needs who require specific support.

Time should be allowed for teachers to reengage with their students and for students to reengage with their teachers, their peers and their learning. Before students are identified as potentially benefitting from the additional supports offered through the CLASS programme, sufficient time should be given to facilitate student reengagement and time to settle in to school and establish/re-establish peer relationships. Cognisance should also be taken of the age and stage of the students and their point of transition between stages. For these reasons, the additional hours provided by the CLASS programme, will be available to schools from 11 October 2021.

The principal, in conjunction with other relevant members of staff, should decide which students should be prioritised to avail of CLASS and should ensure that the resources provided are targeted at those most in need, and who may not be availing of existing additional provision in the school.

Teaching and Learning: How schools can utilise the additional teaching resources

Schools have the autonomy to make evidence-based decisions on how to effectively deploy these additional teaching supports to provide for students identified as being most impacted by Covid and as per guidance provided in *The Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* (2017). Teachers involved in delivering the programme of learning should engage collaboratively in planning the learning experiences. Due consideration should be given to parents' and students' views regarding perceived challenges around full participation and engagement in learning and emerging needs. Parents/guardians and students should be given opportunities to share their views of what supports are needed to ensure optimal success in learning. This partnership should continue throughout the school year 2021/2022.

Co-operative Teaching

The role of the mainstream subject teacher in supporting students' individual learning needs is paramount and subject teachers have first-line responsibility for the education of all students in their classes. Therefore, every effort should be made to support students'

additional and emerging needs within class time and withdrawal of students should be kept to a minimum. Supporting students within class time with the additional resources under CLASS could be usefully achieved by the use of co-operative teaching. Where co-operative teaching is deployed to support targeted individual students in their mainstream class groups, effective planning to meet the specific needs of those students should take place in collaboration with the subject teacher.

Small group or individual interventions

Provision can be made for the withdrawal of students for focused individual and/or group, time-bound interventions where warranted. Targeted small-group interventions using evidence-informed programmes for students with similar needs, can be an effective way to use resources. The impact of withdrawal on students' access to the curriculum with their year groups should however be carefully considered.

Teaching Approaches

Effective teaching approaches to support students' additional learning or special educational needs, whether in the context of mainstream or additional small group teaching, are vitally important. When devising supports for students, effective pedagogical approaches are key to supporting learners to achieve and to experience success.

Guidelines for effective teaching approaches include:

- Clear identification of the needs of the learners
- Provision of clear learning intentions and time for reflection on learning
- Incremental scaffolding of knowledge and skills
- Dedicated time to emphasise and practise the skills of learning to learn
- Provision of wait time for thinking and for answering questions
- Use of graphic organisers and mind maps
- Use of pedagogical approaches which require active learning
- Provision of opportunities for learners to work collaboratively with peers
- Provision of regular feedback to encourage the student to the next steps
- Use of quizzes and competitions to encourage motivation and make learning fun.

Supports at Lunchtime

The CLASS resources may be used to provide targeted interventions at lunchtime to identified students. Lunchtime activities provide opportunities for students of different ages to interact socially, to develop communication and language skills, to promote wellbeing, and to have fun in a safe learning environment. This type of provision will allow opportunities for students to experience quiet time, to engage with learning, to develop peer relationships and/or establish new ones, to generalise learning, and to have focused support from a teacher. There could also be a social element built in with snack time before an activity

begins. Lunchtime activities must have an educational focus which support the student's individual needs as identified in their student support file. Any such activities must be delivered by qualified teachers in line with the accompanying circular.

Examples of lunchtime activities might include: lego clubs/ robotics/games, clubs/coder dojo/ minecraft/computer clubs.

SPORTS PROGRAMME

Any opportunities to provide for students to be physically active will enhance their physical wellbeing. These activities should be offered in a way that ensures team building exercises and peer coaching/mentoring. Consideration should also be given to some "new" sport or physical activity that the school has not been able to offer before, so that there is a sense of novelty and that everyone is a beginner. Learning new skills improves wellbeing.

MUSIC

Lunchtime music clubs where students write their own songs and perform/record the songs and/or raps together should be considered, where appropriate.

DRAMA CLUB

Drama is a powerful way for students to engage with one another, to express themselves and to develop social and language skills. Schools could support small groups of students to participate in appropriate drama-based activities.

Wellbeing

The provision of additional teaching time for schools will allow them to address the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of young people. Wellbeing is both a prerequisite for and outcome of successful learning.

Students' wellbeing can continue to be supported by fostering resilience using the same five key principles¹ that have been used to foster resilience in school communities throughout the pandemic.

- Promoting a **sense of safety** – so that students feel that they are safe, physically and psychologically, and that those around them are safe
- Promoting a **sense of calm** – so that students feel relaxed, composed and grounded (regulated)

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

- Promoting a **sense of belonging and connectedness** – so that students experience reconnecting with their friends and colleagues, and those who understand and support them in the school community
- Promoting a **sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy** – so that students believe that they can manage and do what is needed individually and as a school community
- Promoting a **sense of hope** – so that students believe that things will work out well

For students who continue to struggle to re-engage with learning after the initial settling back period, the following approaches may be helpful:

- Adopting a strengths-based approach – using the student’s strengths, interests and abilities to build resilience and foster a sense of belonging
- Helping students to cope with worries by teaching and practising strategies such as deep breathing, relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, problem-solving by breaking tasks into small, more manageable steps, providing information in accessible format, and using story-telling and other techniques to navigate fears, create solutions and build resilience
- Fostering social connections and friendships
- Differentiating universal approaches and responses using social stories, schedules, visual approaches etc. Teaching skills to support adapting to new routines when at school, including explicit teaching and support about hygiene requirements using visuals, videos and repetition to reinforce key messages
- Using targeted programmes to develop social and emotional competence
- Ensuring ongoing collaboration between parents, students and teachers.

Further suggestions are available in the NEPS Wellbeing Toolkit – *Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs*. and in *Starting a New School Year Supporting the Wellbeing of School Communities: Guidance for Schools*.²

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/af24b-wellbeing-guidance-documents-for-parents-students-and-schools/>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/wellbeingineducation/wellbeing-in-education.html>

² Further guidance, support and information on CPD opportunities for school staff from Department of Education support services and agencies, in particular NEPS and the NCSE (www.ncse.ie) and HSE services are available on gov.ie/backtoschool webpage.

How can schools monitor and report on progress?

As an essential step in planning for improved outcomes for students in terms of their wellbeing and progress in learning, due consideration needs to be given to ensuring how schools will monitor and report on student progress. Schools should review what is the best mechanism by which the progress of a student who is supported by CLASS interventions and resources is measured. Schools should look at their existing whole-school approaches to tracking, recording and monitoring student progress and ensure that these are utilised to the fullest possible extent in relation to interventions which have been put in place with the CLASS resources.

A coherent structure should be in place to transfer data gathered on individual students to the relevant school personnel. This data should be used to inform future learning and/or wellbeing supports that may be required.

Schools may not use the additional teaching resources to:

- Reduce the student-teacher ratio for general subject teaching
- Provide additional subject options for students
- Create smaller class groups which are subject specific e.g. Ordinary Level English/Mathematics etc.
- Provide supports to students who have not been identified through the processes outlined in the previous sections

Key Messages

- The extra resources provided to schools under the CLASS support programme should be used for the students who are prioritised by the school as having been most impacted by COVID, including those who may not have previously come to the attention of the school as needing extra supports
- The students prioritised for support under the CLASS programme should be identified by a robust whole-school collaborative process, in an evidence-based way using the data available in the school
- The supports provided to existing and newly-prioritised students should be tailored to meet the needs of those students in an inclusive manner
- Schools should ensure that the progress of a student who is supported by CLASS interventions and resources is measured and reported upon.

Conclusion

The CLASS programme recognises that schools are aware of the impact of the pandemic on education, particularly for some learners with SEN or those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The programme affords schools the flexibility to implement additional specific educational supports for these learners during the current academic year. The nature of these school-based supports will be determined by the identified needs of the students concerned. This guidance document is intended to assist schools in targeting CLASS supports to those students with the greatest needs and to provide guidelines on key elements for planning the programme. The content and approaches of the programmes should clearly address these identified needs and targets. Teachers delivering the CLASS programme need to be fully aware of students' needs and involved in the target-setting process. Internal school monitoring of progress is an essential feature of the CLASS programme. A written progress record should be retained in the school and also shared with the student's regular teachers and parents.

Queries relating to effective teaching, learning and assessment approaches outlined in this guidance should be forwarded to: classqueries@education.gov.ie