

IPPN Feedback on Draft Guidance for Continuity of Schooling

So as to provide feedback to the Department as requested by today's deadline, IPPN engaged our Board of Directors and senior staff in reviewing the draft document.

There is a strong sense that **the draft document is problematic**, for a number of reasons:

1. **Its aim is unclear** – the document sets out a series of responsibilities and tasks for completion by schools, there is very little guidance provided, and no clarity in relation to when detailed guidance will be provided. “A lot of ‘what’, very little ‘how’” is how one school leader put it.
2. **Its timing is poor** – the document would have been helpful to school leaders a number of weeks ago. Issuing a document with the type of information provided at this stage will be seen as less than helpful and frustrating, when what school leaders are looking for is specific and comprehensive guidance so they can plan the reopening of their schools in September
3. **Its language needs to be reviewed** – it currently reads as prescriptive, generic and it also comes across as patronising – it is mostly telling school leaders and teachers what they already know – what they ‘should’ be doing. The examples coming from engagement countrywide with the Inspectorate will overwhelm and possibly, inflame things further and cause hesitation to engage further.
4. **The document is far too long**. Too many of the suggestions are already being done by schools, probably since April. It could be reduced down to a suggested checklist and the document could be an online appendix to the checklist for those who wished to read more detail
5. There is **no recognition of the diverse nature of schools** and that one size does not fit all
6. **The examples are not helpful** – the feedback is that they create a feeling of ‘all very well for that school, we can’t do that because...’, which is not the aim of providing examples.

Instead of issuing the guidance document as it is currently set out, **it would be considered far more helpful for the minister to issue a *statement* to school leaders**, thanking them and their teachers for their work in making remote learning happen in the past months in exceptionally challenging circumstances, encouraging them to continue with the excellent work they’re doing, and to focus on the key priorities to the end of the school year – continuing to engage with children and families, the wellbeing of staff and pupils, preparing for the next school year as far as possible until further guidance is issued, and seeking support from IPPN, PDST, NCSE, Tusla and other service providers where they need help in leading and managing the current difficult situation.

A *holding statement* regarding when the DES hopes to issue the guidance re. the reopening of schools is crucial. This is the number one concern among school leaders, as expressed in IPPN surveys, in feedback in our 25th May webinar as well as on our phone support line. The expectation is that the guidance will issue too late to be of use, with all the heightened emotions and frustrations that go with this. Wording such as ‘We aim to issue this guidance by 12th June, if at all possible’ would indicate that it’s a goal, rather than a fixed deadline. School leaders could then focus on what they can plan for, and await the guidance to further progress it. It would also be helpful to **set some expectations around school leaders taking a break** during the summer. They are exhausted and will need some time to rest and recharge before planning and managing the reopening for the new

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school year. They cannot and should not be expected to keep working through the summer months without a reasonable break from work.

There is some good guidance on end-of-year reporting, transitions, Stay Safe/RSE and repeating a year – this could be issued separately and is needed asap. We are aware that further work is being done in relation to transitions. Rather than waiting for a ‘perfect’, agreed set of guidelines, **can the aspects already agreed be issued asap with follow-up communication on aspects that required more work?** Again, this helps calm frustrations, and allows leaders to focus on getting as much done as possible before schools close.

In terms of the document itself, if it is decided to issue the Guidance, the following feedback would help to make it more palatable to school leaders:

General Points

- The acknowledgement on the first page of all that has been achieved should include reference to the effective and distributed leadership shown by principals, deputies and their leadership teams over the course of the pandemic, and the dedication and commitment of teachers to address the needs of their students. Furthermore, it should also acknowledge the work of support staff, boards of management, parental groups and school communities who by working together, have managed to achieve continuity in teaching and learning since mid-March. Alternatively, this information could be included when reference is made to various groups on page 3.
- Include references to deputy principals throughout the document and replace some mentions of ‘principal’ with ‘school leader’, so as to be more inclusive of the crucial co-leadership role of the deputy principal
- Move the Using Technology section closer to the top of the document, as it sets out some key points which need to be made earlier. The suggestions throughout the document up to that point assume that there is connectivity, access to devices etc. in the home of all staff and of pupils. This is not the case, and needs to be addressed at the start.

Introduction

- State at the start that the document is a revised version of the guidance issued on [date] in March/April.
- Provide a brief summary of the key points. The document is very long and many won’t read to the end.
- The language needs to be stronger in terms of acknowledgement of the work done to date by teachers and school leaders the extraordinary lengths to which they have gone to upskill, to share information and to communicate with students.
- Acknowledge the data gathered by MU from several thousand school leaders in late March. The only mention of data gathering is the Inspectorate’s interviews; this will frustrate leaders who fed into the research. This work can be included in the Introduction where it states that ‘The DES acknowledges the collective effort...’

Arrangements for the reopening of schools

- This section is currently at the very end of the document, on pages 17 and 18. It needs to be moved to the top of the document as it’s the number one concern of school leaders.

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- It needs to be reworded to clarify that the review/preparatory work is already underway – it currently sounds like the work hasn't yet started
- Holding statement – as outlined earlier

Managing the School

- Phrases such as the following will rankle: 'it is essential that school management maintains a leadership and oversight role of the work of the school'. It could be softened to 'school management will need to continue to provide leadership and oversight of the work of the school'
- Insert 'where available' before 'a distributed model is particularly useful' – this will be helpful to smaller schools, and those who are finding distributed leadership to be problematic. Or omit the point completely.
- Insert 'leadership' in the following 'Staff Meetings: Effective leadership and management.

Supporting the wellbeing of pupils, teachers and families

- Many schools – omit the word 'many'
- "In a small number of cases, the circumstances of teachers and families have posed problems for delivering distance learning through technology." MU research and information from IPPN surveys and queries to our Support Office indicate it is not 'a small number of cases'
- The phrase – 'providing fun and exciting learning opportunities that promote independent learning' is not helpful. Exclude 'fun' and 'exciting' and it would read better from the perspective of the overwhelmed, exhausted school leader.
- **All schools need to help children hear and engage with the Irish language. Would suggest removing references to Irish medium schools in the following, as all schools provide a Gaeilge curriculum - 'encouraging parents of children in Irish-medium schools to provide opportunities for their children to hear and engage with the Irish language, using Irish language television programmes and resources available on websites such as COGG.ie or gaeloideachas.ie'**
- Where is the guidance to help schools with the list of strategies put forward? These are not helpful, schools know what is expected of them. e.g.
 - monitoring pupil engagement levels and implementing strategies to support pupils who find engagement difficult
 - ensuring that any assigned work is suitably adapted to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs or additional needs
- The guidance on internet usage linked on page 6 points to videoconferencing FAQs
- Review of the Critical Incident Policy was mentioned. Revisions to (and templates for) GDPR, Acceptable Use and Child Protection policies would be far more urgent at this stage.

Advancing teaching, learning and assessment

- The following statement needs to be removed. The guidelines expressly stated that schools were only open for delivery of school meals. If schools were doing the above, they were breaking the law. 'For example, some schools involved in the School Meals Programme have made local arrangements for packs of work to be delivered by the meal providers, while other schools have made similar arrangements with local businesses.'

Teacher planning and records of learning

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- The recommendations around Cuntaisí Mhiosúla sound ‘inspector-driven’ and are unnecessary. A recommendation that teachers keep clear notes outlining what they have done to support learning for children, and identifying pupils who will need additional support, would be more appropriate.

Teaching and learning

- There is now an expectation of daily contact between teachers and pupils – some leaders thought this meant personal/individual contact. Even if this is not the concern, this section will cause huge frustration. Suggesting more frequent contact than once per week/fortnight is one thing, however this is a step too far, particularly for those with ongoing connectivity problems, those who find the new technology challenging, and also for teaching principals. Daily contacts needs to be explained more, or there will be backlash.
- One Board member commented as follows, and the sentiments were expressed by several others: *‘If I’m honest, reading the Teaching and Learning section made me cross! School leaders and teachers have been knocking themselves out since March 12th finding innovative ways of communicating with and looking after their pupils in the context of their individual schools - ranging from electronic communication to posting out work to translating text messages and letters into every language you can mention and more besides - and in the first week of June we’re presented with a list of what we should be doing, including a statement that we should be communicating directly with pupils every day. I had a conversation with our Cigire Scoile a couple of weeks ago, and she was at pains to point out the DES’ message of encouragement and support, and of not applying further pressure. That is not the message that comes across in this draft document.’*

July Provision

- Guidance in relation to this is required asap. It can take weeks to recruit and plan.

End-of-year reporting

- The guidance states reports should be made available to parents ‘on or before Friday 12th June’ - Schools are required every year to send out End of Year reports in a time frame that allows parents to contact the school if they have any questions. If they can be trusted to do this every other year, why would a specific date be imposed this year?
- Sample answer to cover the period of remote learning is very unfair on those children whose possibilities for engagement were reduced through lack of regular access to an IT device, through family work situations, Covid-related illness in the family, living in hotel accommodation or direct provision centre.
- The sample is also grossly oversized for use in a regular NCCA generated report. That amount of words would see the font reduce in size to become unreadable.
- Best to omit references to extra-curricular activities as these are at the discretion of individual schools.

Preparing for the end of the school year

- Delaying all of the Stay Safe programme is questionable - it is sensitive but schools should be trusted to do what they think is best for their pupils, and repeat the process in September if this is considered necessary.

Primary Curriculum Framework

- Wording around teacher consultation needs to be softened – ‘It is very important that teachers take the opportunity’ comes across as being tone deaf in the circumstances.

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Managing Transitions

- The suggestion about the school receiving videos of incoming infants introducing themselves could be inappropriate in the GDPR context. Same with recording a video of one of this year's class and sharing it with the incoming class.

The Centre for School Leadership

- Suggested amendments are as follows: 'The CSL continues to support primary school principals at this time. Mentoring support and coaching for school leaders is provided by phone and email (with the coaching support, both face-to-face and team, also available online). The (~~eight~~) three universities and (~~colleges~~) eight centres facilitating the CSL Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership have moved all learning online and applications are open for the September 2020 intake. The [CSL website](#) is updated on a regular basis with links to publications, research and a dedicated blog to assist school leaders at all stages of leadership.'