



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

Framework to maintain Physical Distancing in the Classroom in Post Primary Schools with a Full Return of All Students for the 2020/21 School Year

Roadmap for the Full Return to School

27th July 2020

The interim public health advice provided by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), and the practical application of this advice within schools as reflected in the guidance developed by the Department of Education, is predicated on:

- **Minimising risk of introduction of infection into the school** through exclusion of pupils, staff members and visitors who are ill

- **Managing risk of spread if introduced by the following**
 - Regular hand hygiene;
 - Maintaining physical distancing;
 - Application of respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette; and
 - Environmental hygiene.

The public health advice makes clear that:

“.. the most critical part of managing the risks of COVID-19 related to schools is doing everything practical to avoid introduction of COVID-19 into the school. If the infection is not introduced it cannot spread”.

In terms of maintaining physical distancing, measures fall into two broad categories:

- (i) *Increasing separation;*
- (ii) *Decreasing interaction between students themselves, between students and staff and between staff when they are together;*

The public health advice states that:

“.. the principle of distancing can be usefully applied in the school setting, allowing for some flexibility when needed whilst noting that it must be applied in a practical way, recognising that the learning environment cannot be dominated by a potentially counterproductive focus on this issue”.

The public health advice sets out that physical distancing of at least 1 metre (or of 2 metres where possible) should be maintained between individual students and staff.

The public health advice also recognises that:

- the implementation of physical distancing will look different across the various ages and stages of learning;
- care should be taken to avoid generating tension or potential conflict and some flexibility in the implementation of measures may be required at times;
- staff will not always be able to maintain physical distance from their students and it is not appropriate that they would be expected to do so where this could have a detrimental impact on the student or the learning and health and safety of other students. They should take measures to avoid close contact at face to face level such as remaining standing rather than sitting beside/crouching down.

In terms of reconfiguring schools in a way that enables the implementation of the public health advice within the classroom, it is acknowledged that each school setting is different in terms of (i) location; (ii) physical layout (iii) available space within the school; (iv) student numbers; (v) class configuration; ease of potential access to space outside the school.

In recognition that a 'one size fits all' approach would not be appropriate to impose across all schools, and that schools themselves are best placed to decide on the appropriate configuration for their school, the following framework of available measures is provided as a suite of measures that must be implemented at individual school level to the greatest possible extent:

1. Reconfigure class spaces to maximise physical distancing

Remove any unnecessary cabinets, furniture etc. to maximise space in the classroom.

Rooms should be allocated based on available space with larger classes based in the largest rooms.

Consider whether a central storage area can be provided in the school for teacher resources which can help maximise the space available within the classroom.

Bespoke desk/storage solutions for teachers within classrooms can assist with physical distancing arrangements and should be provided where required.

Some older schools have a plinth around the teacher's desk. The plinth can occupy a substantial area and should be removed wherever possible.

Room layouts should not necessarily be confined to rows, but arrangements such as diagonals etc. should be considered so as to maximise the available learning space for the maximum number of students who will use that room. An illustrative layout is available [here](#) as a guide for schools.

Students should be based in the same classroom as much as possible.

Consideration should be given to seating arrangements in base class to minimise interaction between students from different base classes when they go to their elective classes.

2. Utilising and reconfiguring all available space in the school in order to maximise physical distancing

Review utilisation of all rooms and areas within the school to maximise occupancy in the school.

This may involve utilising all available largest spaces (such as Assembly area, PE Hall etc.) to accommodate larger classes.

3. Review Timetables

Review timetables to ensure available space and teaching resources are maximised to the greatest extent possible (for example, taking account of staggered lunch-time and break periods if possible) to maximise the availability of these largest spaces over the course of the school day.

4. Reconfiguring Classes

Maximise the use of staff resources including any additional resources provided by the Department in response to Covid-19, to achieve physical distance requirements for larger classes e.g. splitting larger classes etc.

While “team teaching” in the classroom is generally encouraged, it can impact on capacity of a school to achieve physical distancing arrangements. Schools should therefore consider whether the needs of pupils can be met in alternative manner such as in separate smaller class groups – particularly for the 2020/21 school year.

5. Consider Use of Live Streaming within the School

For those larger classes which remain difficult to accommodate consider a live streaming of that class to another room or area in the school. The small number of students which could not be accommodated in the main classroom, could watch live from a satellite room or area in the school under supervision by a teacher. Students could be rotated on an equitable basis to the satellite room/area.

6. Accessing available spaces within the local community

Consider accessing available spaces in the local community if practicable.

The above suite of measures provides a practical framework for schools to use to maintain physical distancing in the classroom with the full return of all students for the 2020/21 school year.

In exceptional circumstances, where notwithstanding the application of the measures in the above framework, physical distancing by organisational means for a larger class proves not to be possible, then the school must consider the use of face covering/visors in that larger class. This exceptional measure should be kept continually under review by the school, who should continually make every effort to devise an alternative solution using the measures set out at 1 to 6 above.

The use of face coverings/visors must be implemented where the 1 metre distance cannot be achieved. For example:

- (a) more than 24 students in a 49sq classroom that has been fully cleared
- (b) more than 20 students in a 42sqm classroom.

Staff or students who cannot wear face coverings or visors for health reasons should be based in other classrooms or areas wherever possible. Students should not be required to wear face coverings or visors for the duration of the whole school day.