An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Síceolaíochta Oideachais
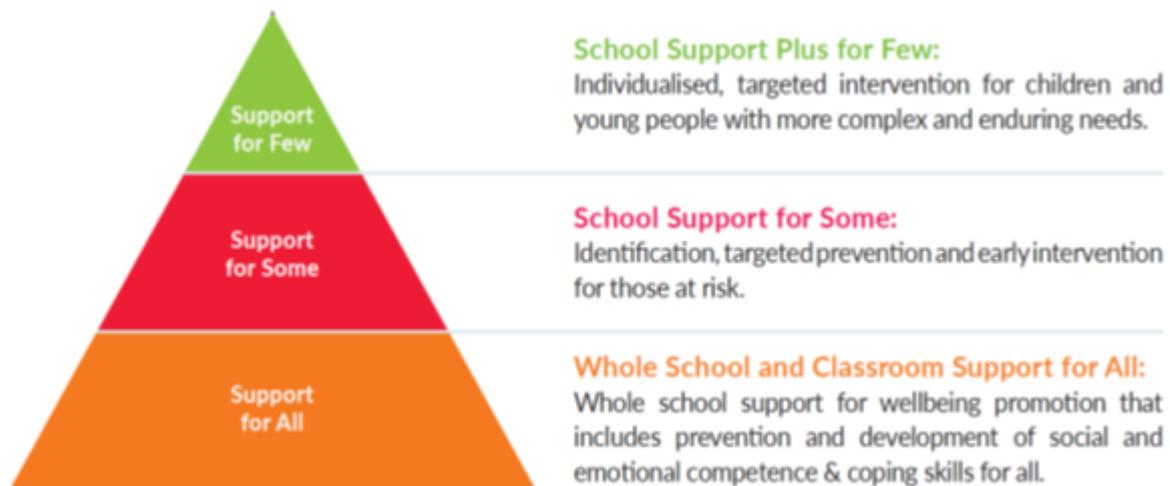National Educational Psychological Service

Guidance for Primary Schools:
Sixth Class Transitions during COVID-19 School Closures

While schools are closed due to the public health measures in place to stop the spread of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus), school communities have had to adapt and adjust, and manage continuity of learning and education in new and innovative ways. Typical final-term activities such as sports days and school tours have all been impacted. These are the last few weeks in primary school for our sixth class pupils and the usual preparation for transition to post-primary school, together with typical school ceremonies to mark this transition, have all been affected. Schools have developed systems for good practice and are providing support to all pupils and their families as they prepare for the transition to their new setting.

The Continuum of Support provides the framework for schools to develop universal transition support for all students, as well as individualised supports and interventions for those with additional and/or special educational needs.

Support for Few

School Support Plus for Few:
Individualised, targeted intervention for children and young people with more complex and enduring needs.

Support for Some

School Support for Some:
Identification, targeted prevention and early intervention for those at risk.

Support for All

Whole School and Classroom Support for All:
Whole school support for wellbeing promotion that includes prevention and development of social and emotional competence & coping skills for all.

The following advice is intended to build upon the good practices already in use by schools to support the needs of all pupils regarding transition. Some pupils may only need general guidance whereas others require more detailed transition plans, for example, those pupils identified as having special educational and/or additional needs, medical needs, those who have recently experienced a family bereavement, children in care, those living in vulnerable families, those who have experienced multiple transitions in their lives, and those who are reluctant to attend school.

This guidance document should be read in conjunction with the Department's Guidance on the Continuity of Schooling (May 2020) which sets out key elements of transition planning for all students. The DES document recommended that primary school principals assign special education teachers to support pupils with additional needs to implement individual transition plans, taking into account the particular

concerns identified by the pupils, parents/guardians and teachers. Communication with external professional agencies such as NEPS, Network Disability Teams, Primary Care Services and CAMHS may be helpful in this regard.

Supporting resilience during times like this is helped if there is a focus on the promotion of five key elements:
- Promoting a sense of safety
- Promoting a sense of calm
- Promoting a sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy
- Promoting connectedness
- Promoting hope

It is recognised that all schools are different and each school should continue to adapt and differentiate the following suggestions to the individual needs of their school and pupils. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is available to support school staff during this time.

1. Promoting a sense of SAFETY

Many pupils will be worried about the transition to post-primary school in the context of Covid-19. Promoting a sense of safety helps pupils believe that their needs will be met now and in the future and that they are protected from harm. Safety is important 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:

Support for ALL

- Continue to encourage a sense of cohesiveness and togetherness with the class group in the final weeks of primary school by using online technology.
- Continue to support pupils to maintain healthy routines and schedules which help them feel more secure and reassured during this unprecedented time.
- Many schools are already providing information and lessons on transition for sixth class pupils. In these lessons, remember to explore expectations, things that children are looking forward to, concerns, and how they might manage and cope with these concerns, their fears or anxieties. Engaging students in two-way conversations about moving on to post-primary promotes safety and provides them with the reassurance that they so often need. Encourage parents/guardians to talk to their children about these concerns.
- Encourage parents/guardians to continue to liaise with and/or check the post-primary school website over the summer months to ensure that they have up-to-date information about physical safety measures that may be in place in

September and to stay informed as to what school may be like for their child in order to prepare them for these new routines.

Support for SOME/FEW

- Continue to check in with vulnerable families and link them to community supports, if needed. Adhere to Children First (Tusla) guidelines.
- For those pupils whose understanding or communication needs mean they may experience increased uncertainty at this time, promote safety and security by maintaining ongoing contact with their parents/guardians via phone and/or email to support the transition process.
  Provide safe opportunities for pupils to talk about/draw their worries and concerns and/or to ask questions relating to the transition and provide them with appropriate information in an accessible format to address these concerns.
  Provide reassurance that post-primary schools are planning ways to help all pupils feel safe during transition.

2. Promoting a sense of CALM

Some pupils will be experiencing a heightened sense of worry about the transition to post-primary school in the context of Covid-19. Acknowledging and addressing this worry will help support their transition. Promoting a sense of calm helps pupils to relax and stay grounded. This helps to focus and concentrate on what we need to do. The following can help promote a sense of calm:

> I can do things to help me feel calm

Support for ALL

- Remind pupils of the strategies we all use to manage worry and stay calm. Breathing, thinking positive thoughts, getting enough sleep, eating healthily, taking physical exercise will help. Encourage pupils to think about the strategies they have used in the past that helped them when they were worried.
- Reassure pupils in a developmentally appropriate way that they are not alone in experiencing difficulty in the current circumstances. Continue to remain positive and calm in your interactions with pupils.
- Ensure that an effective communication system is in place between parent/ guardians and the school so that they can clarify any queries they may have. Acknowledge and address parents/guardians' concerns regarding the transition. Schools can provide affirming messages such as 'we want to ensure your son/daughter's experience of transition is calm'. Signpost parents/guardians to information on keeping children and young people well during Covid-19.
- The sharing or transfer of information about individual student's needs is central to effective transition. It is recommended that schools use the Education Passport

[materials](#) developed by the NCCA, including the child and parent forms, as usual this year. The passport is retained in the primary school until the post-primary school principal or designated person with responsibility for initiating pupil information transfers, sends a written request for the children's report cards.

- Link with the post-primary school and if possible share a virtual tour/photos/maps of the school. Encourage parents/guardians to visit the post-primary school website to keep up-to-date with the school news and communications.

In situations where a pupil does not have a confirmed place in a post-primary school for September 2020, schools can assist parents/guardians by making contact with or providing contact details for the relevant educational welfare officer (EWO) or the local special educational needs organiser (SENO) in relation to specialist placements.

Support for SOME/FEW

- Communication with the receiving post-primary school is essential in order to highlight individual needs and provide reassurance that supports will be in place in the new school based on their identified need. Transfer of information should document pupil's strengths/interests/needs, as well as provide information about interventions provided in primary school and supports which may be required at post-primary ([NEPS: Transition to Post Primary Transfer Profile](#)).
- The voice of the pupil should inform the transition process especially for those with additional needs. Wherever possible, ask the pupil what they would like their new school to know about them.
- Link with the local special educational needs organiser (SENO), if necessary, to ensure that supports (such as assistive technology, transport, placement) are in place for pupils with special educational needs.
- Avail of an online transition programme using [NEPS](#) and [NCSE](#) resources.
- Students with additional needs will require more detailed information about what post-primary school will look like and what to expect. Use social stories/ photographs/virtual tours to the school/virtual information sessions/ pre-recorded video from post-primary teacher. Where possible, provide pupils with a timetable in advance. Social stories can also be used to help prepare and teach pupils about physical distancing and hygiene etiquette required for the return to school.
- Consider requesting a named contact person for parents/guardians of pupils with additional needs. If possible, it would be beneficial for children with additional needs to link with class tutor/special education teacher of the post-primary school in advance using video technology, to provide reassurance and answer any questions they might have.

3. 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 pupils 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 self and community:

> I know what to do and where to get help if I need it. I can manage.
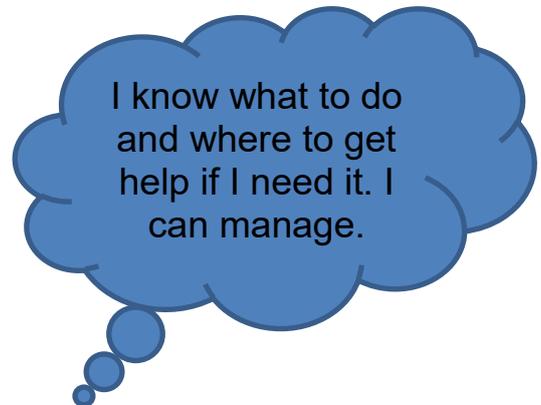
Support for ALL

- Provide reassurance and normalise feelings of loss and 'missing out' on end of year rituals. Acknowledge that it is their last few weeks as the 'senior class'.
- Provide pupils with an opportunity to do a homework task/classroom activity on times when they coped with change or overcame challenges. Check in with individual children if they are struggling to think of occasions when they were strong or helped others in the past, to draw out their strengths and coping skills. Discuss what positives they have learned about themselves during this time.
- Provide children with an opportunity to reflect on their time at school and highlight best experiences; key things they have learned/skills acquired; and achievements of which they are most proud.
- Invite the principal of a local post-primary school to join a virtual class discussion on transition. Share NEPS Organisational Tips with pupils and parents/guardians.
- Invite a post-primary school student to join a class discussion on transition to a new post-primary school – what to expect, etc.
- Remind pupils that some of them will be transitioning with their friends and will possibly see older siblings or cousins in the post-primary school. Support those who are going to a different school to their friends with ideas on how to make new friends, and how to keep in touch with their primary school friends.

Support for SOME/FEW

- It is important that the pupil knows who they can speak to in their new school if they have a worry. For example, it would be most helpful if students with additional needs could meet a link person from the post-primary school virtually in advance of the transition (e.g. SET teacher/guidance counsellor/class tutor).
- Support pupils to set their own targets and goals for transition. Encourage them to create a personal portfolio to include their strengths, achievements and what helps them learn and thrive - which can travel with them to their new school.

- Highlight the importance of the development of independent skills for students with additional needs (e.g. managing their personal belongings, dressing, eating, personal hygiene).

4. Promoting a sense of CONNECTEDNESS

Promoting 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, as many will have experienced loss of connection with friends and teachers as a result of school closures. The following can help promote a sense of connectedness:

> I am part of my class and school. I have a voice and I am listened to

Support for ALL
- Transitions start with an ending. A sixth class celebration to mark this ending can still take place and many schools are already planning online graduation ceremonies where pupils can choose/create music, readings, poems and pictures.
- Provide opportunities to record memories; individual profiles; digital mementos as part of a virtual transition ritual. Children can write goodbye messages to each other and their teacher and/or support staff. Similarly school staff can write letters/cards to the children. Children could write a letter to their future self which the teacher then posts to them in a year's time.
- Encourage openness towards new opportunities and friendships in the new school.
- Encourage children to mind and be kind to each other during this time. Peer connections and friendships often buffer against stress and worry.
- Instead of school tours and nature walks, many schools are completing virtual school tours/sports days/nature trails similar to a treasure hunt, where children find flora and fauna. Check out SESE section on PDST Health and Wellbeing website for further ideas on fun events.
- Share President Higgins' message with all sixth class pupils.

Support for SOME/FEW

- Relationships or connections with key adults in the post-primary school will facilitate effective transition for students with additional needs and schools will already have links with specific member/s of staff from the post-primary school.
- Encourage the post-primary school to be mindful of friendship groups for vulnerable pupils when assigning classes. Find out if there is a buddy system available at post-primary.

- Encourage parents/guardians to maintain and/or facilitate links with peers/friends attending the same post-primary school over the summer months (whilst adhering to physical distancing guidelines) to maintain friendships and connections and help foster resilience and coping.
- Making new friends is often cited as a key concern for students with special educational needs during the transition to post-primary school. Continue to use social stories and/or role play/modelling to provide support around how to make and maintain new friendships.

5. Promoting a sense of HOPE

A sense of hope is related to fostering resilience and the expectation that things will work out for pupils 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:

Being in school helps me reach my goals

Support for ALL

- Teachers continue to convey the exciting and happy prospects of transition. Provide reassurance to children that they have lots of things to look forward to - new friends, new subjects, and new experiences - whilst also acknowledging how brave they are and how this is a difficult situation.
- Teachers can support children to identify their strengths and use these as coping strategies if they feel anxious, shy, nervous or down. The SPHE curriculum and Friends for Life programme may be helpful in brainstorming ideas for a coping plan.
- Staff may consider a virtual class discussion or tasks to help children to visualise their future and all the positive things they are looking forward to in the future.

Support for SOME/FEW

- Use the information gathered to identify strengths, interests and competencies, in order to highlight protective factors which can be used to create supportive and responsive environments as pupils transition to post-primary school.
- Encourage parents/guardians to model and reinforce positive attitudes and expectations about the transition to post-primary. This is especially important for families of children with additional needs.

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