



Supporting the Wellbeing of School Communities as Schools Reopen: Guidance for Schools

September 2020

Note: This is a working document which will be kept under review

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1. Introduction

The Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019) proposes that

Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life.

Promoting the wellbeing of our school communities is a fundamental element of the Department's overall plan to support a successful return to school as we continue to manage the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. We are living through exceptional times and this impacts on the wellbeing of everyone in different ways, at different times. People have been naturally worried about the risk to their physical health and that of their loved ones and have been challenged to varying degrees by the public health measures that have been put in place in Ireland to control the spread of the virus, such as staying at home and school closures.

People have an inbuilt capacity to adapt. This is what is at the heart of resilience. Most people are weathering this storm and will emerge stronger and with new skills. Most respond really well to information and practical advice on new ways of managing and staying active and connected. Some will, for a variety of reasons, struggle a little to adapt and will need greater levels of practical and social support to make the adjustments needed to stay well. A very small number may find the changes brought about by COVID-19 very challenging, and may need higher levels of practical and mental health supports.

As we reopen schools we know that most students, and indeed their families and school staff will have been looking forward to going back, reconnecting with school, reconnecting with staff and friends and settling back into school work. This is a time of change, with new rules and routines to learn, in order to keep everyone safe. Some students may feel anxious about the return to school. In times of change some worry or anxiety is a normal response. Most will settle and re-engage with little difficulty after an initial settling in period.

It is important that children and young people are supported to experience a successful transition back to school, recognising that transition is a process over time rather than a once-off event. The following guidance will help school staff support their students on this transition journey acknowledging that each school community has its own unique characteristics and will therefore use this guidance to develop their own plan to support the wellbeing of their own school community.

The guidance set out here provides advice on the overall approach to supporting the wellbeing of school communities at this time. It is supplemented with additional resources and support, set out in Section 8 of this document, and available on [gov.ie/backtoschool](https://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

2. Essential Guiding Principles

Supporting the wellbeing of school communities at this time of transition is helped by fostering resilience using five key principles¹:

- Promoting a **sense of safety** – so that people feel that they are safe, and that those around them are safe
- Promoting a **sense of calm** – so that people feel relaxed, composed and grounded (regulated)
- Promoting a **sense of belonging and connectedness** – so that people experience having meaningful relationships with others who understand and support them
- Promoting a **sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy** – so that people believe that they can manage and do what is needed, and so can their school community
- Promoting a **sense of hopefulness** – so that people believe that things will work out well

Supporting a successful transition back to what will be our new normal is best achieved when those within the school community feel safe, calm and hopeful, when they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to their school community and feel that they can manage with the support of their community.

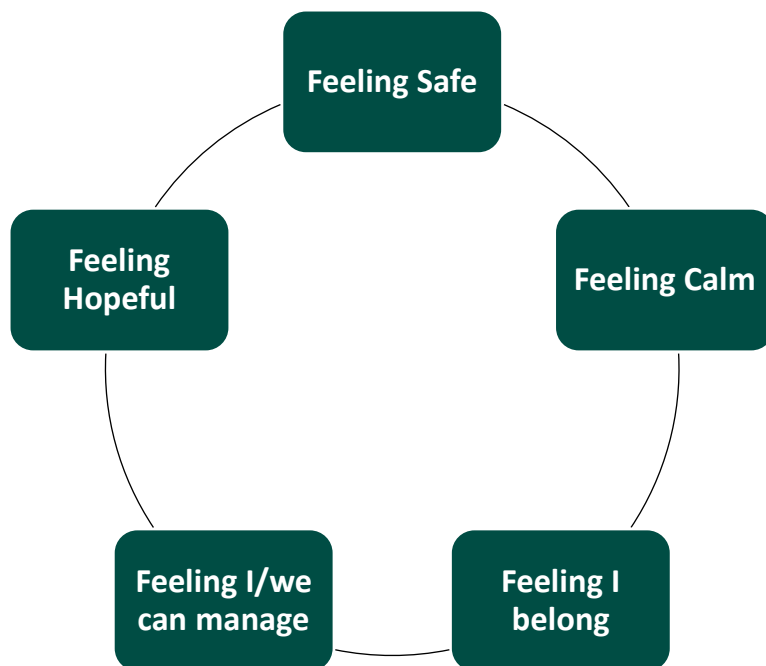


Figure 1: Key Goals for the School Community

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

3. A Continuum of Support for Transition

As schools reopen there will be changes for everyone. Students will be changing classes, some may be changing teachers and some will have changed schools. There will be new school rules and routines to learn to keep everyone safe. All schools are different and each school will know how best to support the process of transition within their own school. It is important to adopt a whole-school approach to supporting a successful transition back to school.

The Continuum of Support framework (Figure 1) supports a whole-school approach to planning for the return to school and helps to ensure that staff, students and parents feel welcome, safe and secure. It also recognises that some students will require more targeted intervention and planning to help them reconnect with their school community and re-engage with learning.

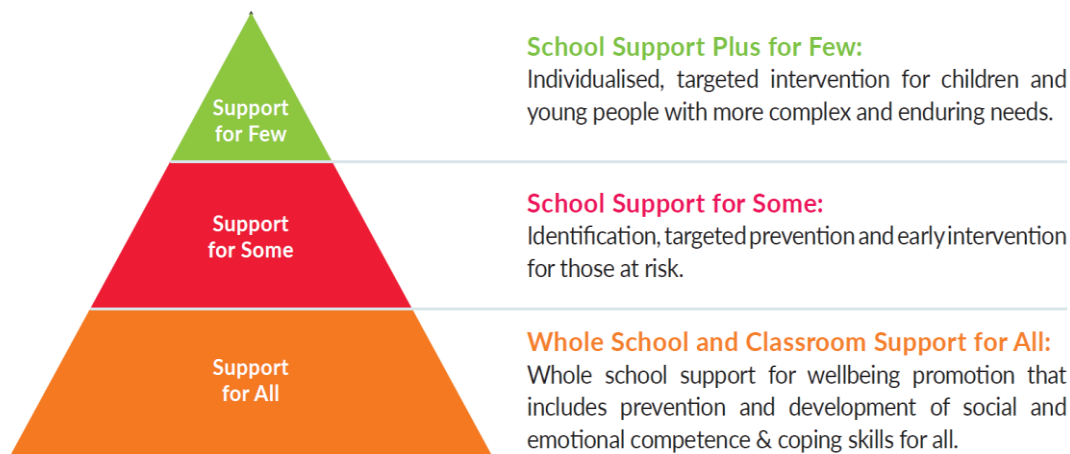


Figure 1: The DES Continuum of Support Framework

4. Reopening Schools: Supporting Wellbeing

4.1. Level 1: Universal Response for All Students

At a universal level a whole school response is required to support the wellbeing of all within the school community as we reopen schools.



At a universal level a whole school response is required to support the wellbeing of all within the school community as we reopen schools. This response encompasses the following elements:

1. Implementing physical safety measures

Schools have been provided with practical guidance and support around the safety measures that need to be put in place in order to support a safe return to school for all. Understanding the importance of the safety measures that need to be in place requires clear messaging and school staff, parent and student awareness-raising. This may involve sharing briefing letters, with pictures of changes to the physical organisation of the school. Younger children or those with special educational or additional needs may benefit from developmentally appropriate language and visual support to help explain new rules for staying safe at school.

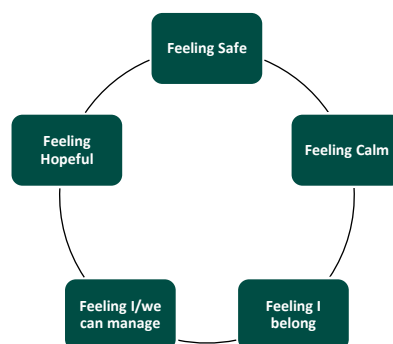
2. Settling In - Slow Down to Catch Up

It will take time for staff and students to adjust to being back in the school environment and be ready and available to fully engage with teaching and learning. A sense of urgency about returning to the curriculum is natural but time spent on settling the students and getting the students *ready* for learning will yield positive outcomes in the longer term and will likely reduce stress. So it is important that teachers and school staff do not rush into a focus on formal teaching and learning before first considering readiness, and focusing on wellbeing.

- Routines create a sense of psychological safety by providing predictability. Re-establishing routines or creating new ones will contribute to a safe and calm learning environment and give students a sense of security.
- We will see a variety of responses amongst our students as schools reopen ranging from excitement and happiness to worry and anxiety, which are normal responses to unprecedented events. Normalising feelings by communicating that we have all struggled with aspects of school closure, the pandemic and school reopening, will help to create a safe environment for students. (*It's normal to feel anxious when things are changed.*)

- Remember that adults in the school are important role models for students. Modelling calm responses and coping strategies will help students learn helpful ways of managing their fears and anxieties.
- Some students may find it more difficult to sit, focus and concentrate for the lengths of time they may have been able to manage prior to school closure, because they have not practised these skills for a number of months. We usually see this when students return to school after summer holidays. Shorter learning intervals, followed by safe movement breaks (even standing up and stretching), will help to support increased concentration and focus. Many will benefit from relaxation techniques and calming activities, such as mindfulness, drawing, physical activity, music, and relaxation/ breathing exercises.
- Plan for managing those transitions that were impacted by school closures in a way that the school can manage. For example, for some students in primary school who will have a new teacher, having an opportunity to meet with the teacher they had as schools closed at short notice, may be helpful.
- Different cohorts of students may require a different wellbeing focus:
 - Students transitioning into a school for the first time (Junior Infants/First Years/Those moving school) may need particular attention to be focused on establishing relationships
 - Students taking State Examinations in 2021 may need particular attention to be focused on calm and hope

Take time as a school staff to consider the needs within your community, and how the school might best promote wellbeing in order to achieve our goal:



Watching the NEPS Wellbeing Webinar and using the NEPS Wellbeing Toolkit for Teachers will provide further advice, suggestions and resources to support you as a staff to generate ideas and a plan for wellbeing promotion for your school during this settling in period (gov.ie/backtoschool).

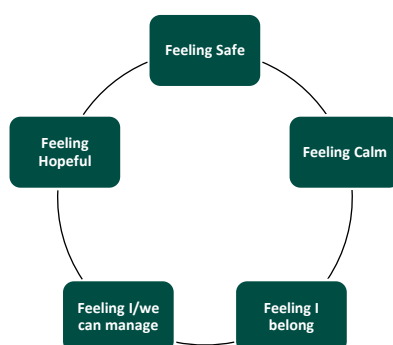
3. Communicating Key Messages within the School Community:

Key messages that will support the wellbeing of the school community at this time include:

- Our school is opening up and staff are really looking forward to welcoming students back and helping them re-engage with learning in school
- Most students will be looking forward to school and meeting up with friends, teachers and other school staff. Many will feel excited, relieved and happy. Some may feel a little anxious and worried about getting back. That's to be expected and it's a normal

response at a time of transition and change. Most students will settle in over time, as they reconnect with friends and get used to the new school safety routines.

- Our school has been working very hard to make sure that the school building and playground will be safe for all of the students, teachers and parents. This will mean some new routines and rules to keep everyone safe. We will support you to learn these new routines and rules.
- School staff know that wellbeing is important and needed for learning to happen. We are prioritising the things that we know will promote wellbeing at this time.
- School staff know that parents have made great efforts to support their child's continued education when schools were closed and that parents have done your best. Teachers will be starting with where every student is at.
- Getting back to a school routine, getting enough sleep, eating healthily, taking physical exercise, taking some time to be creative and reconnecting with friends will help everyone to settle back in.
- These messages have been included in a series of videos developed for children/young people and parents, which schools may wish to circulate to families, as appropriate. Details on accessing them are available in Section 8 of this document.



4.2 Levels 2 and 3: Targeted and Individualised Response for Some/Few Students

Some students and their families may need additional help to settle back into school. It is important to take notice of and plan to support students who don't settle after an initial period, despite having had access to universal support.



Students who struggle to settle back into school may require support that is in addition to the universal wellbeing supports being provided for all students. These may include those who:

- are reluctant to attend school
- are absent due to illness/for medical reasons
- were previously identified as having special educational and/or additional needs
- have experienced loss/grief (bereaved/illness/family illness)
- have become or are at risk of becoming disengaged from learning
- whose behaviour seems different or out of character

For some of these students their needs may have emerged during the pandemic, while some others may have had existing needs prior to school closure. These students may find the return to school challenging and require additional support to help them to adjust to changes in schools' routines and environments. Actively involving students in the planning for their return to schools will help reduce their worries and rebuild a sense of belonging and connection. Taking time to re-engage with class teachers, special education teachers and special needs assistants, as appropriate, will help support the transition back to school. Student support plans should be developed in collaboration with parents to identify current strengths and needs and enhance the effectiveness of intervention planning. For those students unable to return to school immediately (e.g. due to health concerns), ongoing distant learning supports will be required.

For students who continue to struggle 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 using strategies such as deep breathing, relaxation techniques, focusing on positive thoughts, 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 Toolkits. Schools will be supported with this response by the provision of a range of further guidance and support from DES Support Services and Agencies², the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and HSE Services. These are being communicated via the gov.ie/backtoschool webpage.

4. Promoting School Staff Wellbeing

Everyone will have had different experiences of the pandemic and it will take time to adjust to the 'new normal'. It is especially important that adults in the school are proactive and look after their own wellbeing. Student wellbeing is influenced by the wellbeing of the adults around them. Students pick up on the stress of others so it is important that adults model positive ways of coping with change and the return to school.

The Department recognises the need for school staff wellbeing and collective self-care. Support for school staff wellbeing will be provided by Department Support Services including the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), as well as by the HSE's Health Promotion Team. An [Occupational Health Strategy](#) is in place as a supportive resource for staff in schools. The aim of the Occupational Health Strategy is to promote the health and wellbeing of employees in the workplace, with a strong focus on prevention. The Occupational Health Strategy comprises the Employee Assistance Service and the Occupational Health Service. The Employee Assistance Service (EAS) is provided by Spectrum.life. They are providing this support under the banner of '*Wellbeing Together: Folláinne Le Chéile*'.

Under the EAS, employees have a dedicated free-phone confidential helpline 1800 411 057 available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year providing advice on a range of issues such as wellbeing, legal, financial, mediation, management support etc. Where required, short-term counselling is available to employees and their families (over the age of 18 years and living at home). A bespoke wellbeing portal and app which offers access to podcasts and blogs on topics around wellbeing and mental health, family life, exercise and nutrition is also available. In addition online cognitive behavioural therapy is provided. Spectrum.life will also be providing a series of webinars and presentations to promote staff wellbeing in schools as schools reopen and during the upcoming school year.

Within the schools' setting school staff will benefit from:

- Clear messages about the arrangements in place to reopen schools
- Access to guidance and resources to build knowledge and awareness of how best to support the wellbeing of students on return to schools
- Strategies to build collective staff wellness and resilience
- Knowing how and where to get support (gov.ie/backtoschool)

² The Department's Support Services/Agencies include the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), Centre for School Leadership (CSL), National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Support Service, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

Partnering with Parents/Carers

It is important to partner with families to ensure a whole school community, aligned response to reopening schools successfully. Parents/carers will benefit from:

- Clear messages about:
 - the arrangements in place to reopen schools and keep children/young people safe, ongoing
 - how the school will support the wellbeing of students on return to school in order to support their child's reengagement with learning
- Acknowledgement of their efforts and challenges supporting their child's education at home/reassuring them of the support of the school
- Being invited to share with the school examples of new experiences, new skills and progress that their children have made
- Being invited to share with the school if they have concerns or are worried about their children with the school
- Knowing how and where to get support (gov.ie/backtoschool)

Encouraging student voice and agency

It is important to remember to provide ongoing opportunities for the voices of the children/young people in a school to be heard, and responded to in a meaningful way. It is also important to involve students in the school plans to ensure safety as we reopen schools. Students will benefit from:

- Clear messages, communicated in a meaningful and developmentally appropriate way, about:
 - the arrangements in place to reopen schools and keep children/young people safe ongoing, and the rationale for these arrangements
 - how the school will support their wellbeing on return to school, which will in turn support their reengagement with learning
 - their own responsibilities in helping to keep the school environment safeThis may involve parents supporting the communication of these messages in advance of the student returning to school, depending on their age or stage of development.
- Being invited to contribute to reviews of the whole school approach
- Understanding how they can proactively support their own wellbeing by getting enough sleep, establishing routines, eating healthily, getting physical exercise, taking time for creativity etc.
- Hearing that it's normal to feel anxious or worried about coming back to school. This is a time of change, and it's normal to feel anxious or worried at times of change.
- Being invited to share with the school, within a safe forum, if they have concerns or are worried
- As appropriate to their age and stage of development, knowing how and where to get support (gov.ie/backtoschool)

Resources and Support for School Communities:

The foundation for the provision of a continuum of support in schools is the provision of support for school staff wellbeing, and guidance to help school staff to feel confident and equipped to support the wellbeing of their students. The Department has worked closely with its broad range of support services and agencies³, and with the HSE/HSE-funded services and the Tusla Education Support Service to create an aligned and coherent package of supports and resources to assist schools in this regard. Supports include:

- Short video clips to communicate with students and parents about the return to school with key universal messages.
 - Post Primary Students: [here](#) and [here](#)
 - Primary Students (3rd to 6th): [here](#) and [here](#)
 - Primary Students (J1 to 2nd): [here](#) and [here](#)
 - Parent Advice: [here](#) and [here](#)
- A range of Resources and Support for School Communities developed by NEPS:
 - [Wellbeing Webinars](#) for primary/special/post-primary schools - supporting wellbeing as schools reopen
 - [Wellbeing Toolkits for Schools](#) with a range of easily downloadable, user-friendly materials
 - Additional guidance for schools, to supplement the Wellbeing Toolkits, [Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs \(SEN\) Returning to School](#)
 - [Advice and resources for parents, student and school staff](#) to support their wellbeing as they return and settle into school
- Support services will work with schools over the coming academic year in phases as follows:
 - Phase 1: School reopening to Hallowe'en
 - Phase 2: Hallowe'en to end of December 2020
 - Phase 3: January 2021 to end of academic year

Directories and catalogues of online supports to outline available wellbeing CPD and provision for primary, special and post-primary schools and parents during Phase 1 have been developed. This information, which is available [here](#) and will be updated on an ongoing basis, includes:

- Directory of Wellbeing CPD and Support for Schools in Returning and Settling into School for Primary/Special and Post Primary schools
- Directory of Online Support for Schools in Returning and Settling into School for Primary/Special and Post Primary schools

³ The Department's Support Services/Agencies include the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), Centre for School Leadership (CSL), National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Support Service, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

- Directory of Wellbeing Supports & Online Resources for Parents on Returning and Settling into School for Primary/special and Post Primary schools
- There are also links to support for school staff wellbeing provided by:
 - Spectrum Life, the new dedicated employee assistance provider for school staff has developed a range of accessible supports. These include access to a Wellbeing Content Hub, an Employee Assistance Programme and Mental Health Supports and Digital Wellbeing Events. Further details are available [here](#)
 - Professional Development Service for Teachers ([here](#))
 - HSE's Health Promotion Team
 - HSE/HSE-funded service providers - e-mental health services, including free on-line counselling [here](#)

In addition, enhanced services for wellbeing will be provided by NEPS, to include the wellbeing of all of our special school communities. An additional 17 NEPS psychologists are being appointed. In Phase 1 NEPS will be providing a service to all schools with a focus on wellbeing. NEPS psychologists will connect with each school, listen to their needs and engage in initial planning with schools on how best to respond.

Furthermore, for our post-primary schools, approximately 120 posts are being provided for guidance to support student wellbeing recognising the particular importance for this support in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic challenges.

Finally, our partners in the HSE and in HSE-funded services such as *Spunout*, *Jigsaw*, *MyMind*, *Childline* and *Turn2Me*, are providing access to e-mental health services, including on-line counselling, if needed. Details of the services being provided are available [here](#).



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