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To the Trustees, Boards of Management and Principals of Primary and Voluntary Secondary Schools

The Sharing of School Facilities with the Community

Circ Letter Post Primary M18/05 & Prim 16/05

The Department of Education & Science has now opened nine of a planned ten Regional Offices and the tenth, to be established in Blanchardstown, will open in the Summer of 2005. The list of the ten Regional Offices and the areas they serve are shown on the Department website <http://www.education.ie/> (follow link)

One of the issues regularly raised through the Regional Offices by local and community interests is the use of school facilities outside of school time for community education and recreation purposes. These requests have come from a variety of bodies including County Development Boards, community groups and the National Children's Office.

The National Play Policy, *Ready, Steady, Play!*, recommends that school facilities should be made available to local communities for play and recreation purposes where possible.

The purpose of this circular is to urge Trustees and Boards of Management to give serious consideration to such requests where possible. In urging and encouraging the Trustees and Boards of Management to respond sensitively to this need, the Department fully appreciates that the decision ultimately lies with the relevant Board or Trustees and that the first priority at all times should be the interest of the school, its teachers and pupils.

Many schools already make their premises available to the local community outside of school hours and schools profit from the improved relationship with the wider community. Good relations between the school and the community can be beneficial when it comes to seeking placements for work experience, outlets for community service or when schools seek to access local services and expertise. Being linked in effectively with the local community can help the school to provide a wider curriculum and range of co-curricular activities. It is for this reason that the Department publication *Looking at our Schools: an aid to self-evaluation for primary and post-primary schools*, suggests that the relationships between the school and the wider community should form one of the self-evaluation criteria for schools.

The Department also acknowledges the need for Trustees and Boards to prioritise the interests of the principal school users and to protect their own interests. For this reason, they should ensure that:

1. There is a licence agreement between the Board and the group using the school premises
2. The agreement with users of school facilities should be underwritten by a contract. This contract should be reviewed regularly
3. Any agreement should be in conformity with the lease for the building.
4. There is an arrangement in place to cover additional costs for insurance, heating lighting, cleaning and maintenance of the areas used by the groups
5. All external groups using the school have public liability cover and adequate insurance. Insurance certificates should be presented to the Board of Management annually.
6. Health and safety issues are addressed
7. Child Protection Guidelines are followed.

There may also be other considerations that a Board might wish to specify as a condition for permitting the use of its facilities by outside groups, such as for example, that any activity must be in keeping with the ethos of the school.

Yours sincerely,

Frank Wyse
Director of Regional Services
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