



An Roinn Oideachais  
Department of Education

## **Starting a New School Year**

# **Supporting the Wellbeing of School Communities: Guidance for Schools**

September 2021

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## 1. Introduction

We've seen huge progress in the fight against Covid-19. So much of society has re-opened and many of the things we all enjoy doing, or rely on, are possible once again. We continue on a daily basis to adapt and adopt to living with Covid-19. Schools were closed for prolonged periods last year and we were required to stay at home. Families and school communities have experienced considerable challenges as we grappled with three waves of Covid-19 and the associated public health measure, adapted to remote learning and the narrowing of our wider family and social support circles. We have all been naturally worried about the risks to our physical health and that of our loved ones. These challenges have impacted on our wellbeing in different ways and at different times.

We all acknowledge the significant national contribution that was made last year by schools, contributing a sense of calm and stability to families in Ireland. As we start a new school year, we know that most children and young people and school staff are looking forward to reconnecting with each other and settling back into school life. Naturally, many of us may feel apprehensive about the return to school. That's to be expected and it's a normal response at a time of transition and change. School communities continue to work hard with support and guidance from the Departments of Education and Department of Health, to ensure that schools continue to be safe. This work will continue on an ongoing basis to maintain the safety of all in the school community.

It is important to remember that we all have an inbuilt capacity to adapt. Despite the fact that we may all be feeling a little jaded from Covid-19, we have all learned many new skills and have adapted throughout these exceptional times. This is what is at the heart of resilience. We know, however, that the experience of the past year has not been the same for everyone. Many of us will have coped well, experiencing good days and bad days. Some may have thrived on the challenges that Covid has brought but others of us will have experienced much greater adversity and impact on our physical and mental health.

We will need to be cognisant of the effects of this range of experiences as we plan for the new school year ahead and the return to learning and school life for all. It may be helpful to take stock of where we are and all we have achieved and our next steps towards our goals this year. It is really important to remember that our children and young people did not lose all of their previously learned skills and knowledge despite repeated school closures. The role of teachers and other school staff in ensuring this is acknowledged. Once they are back in the familiar environment of school, most students will re-engage with learning and move forward. Some, of course, will need more support to get going again, in line with the school's continuum of support. This guidance is intended to be adapted by school communities to plan for supporting wellbeing on this journey.

The next section of this document, Section 2 considers the essential guiding principles for fostering resilience during times of uncertainty. Sections 3 and 4 reflect on how schools have provided and will continue to provide a responsive continuum of support that addresses the range of experiences and impact on the school community and signposts to external supports and resources. A focus on school staff wellbeing is included in Section 5. Partnering with parents and encouraging student voice and agency are also key elements of



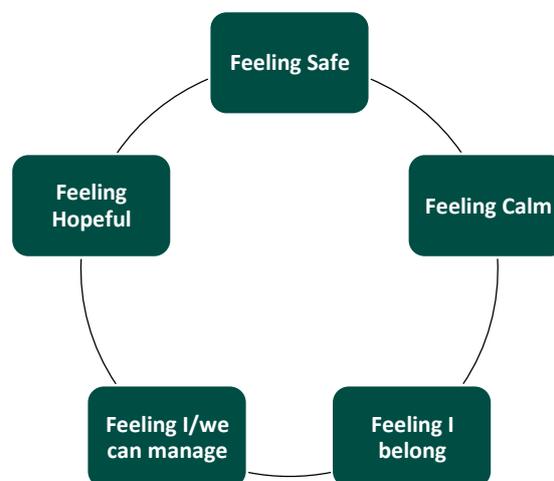
this guidance, as outlined in Sections 6 and 7. Finally, this guidance is supplemented with links to additional resources and support, set out in Section 8, and available on [gov.ie/backtoschool](https://gov.ie/backtoschool)

## 2. Essential Guiding Principles

Supporting the wellbeing of school communities this school year can continue to be supported by fostering resilience using the same five key principles<sup>1</sup> that have been used to foster resilience in school communities throughout the pandemic.

- Promoting a **sense of safety** – so that people feel that they are safe, physically and psychologically, 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 reconnecting with their friends and colleagues, and those who understand and support them in the school community
- Promoting a **sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy** – so that people believe that they can manage and do what is needed individually and as a school community
- Promoting a **sense of hope** – so that people believe that things will work out well

Supporting a successful start and settling in to the new school year 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.



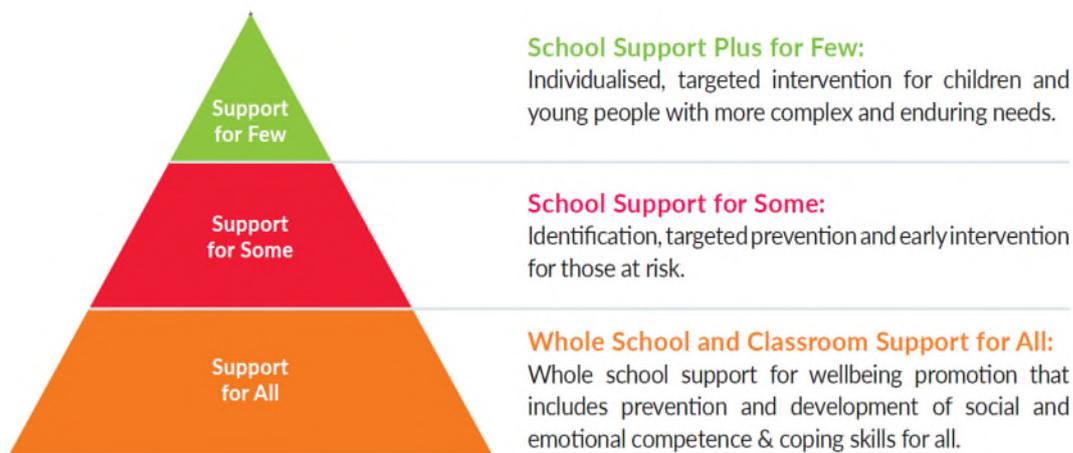
**Figure 1: Key Goals for the School Community**

<sup>1</sup> 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. Continuum of Support

As we start a new school year, rules and routines will be in place to keep everyone safe.

The Continuum of Support framework (Figure 2) supports a whole-school approach 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.

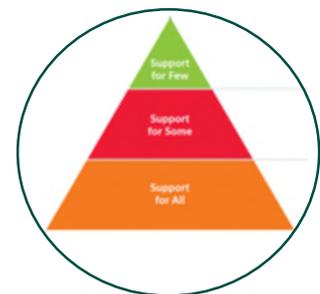


*Figure 2: The Department/NEPS Continuum of Support Framework*

### 4. 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.



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

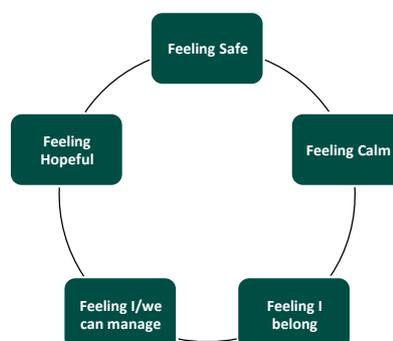
#### 1. Implementing physical safety measures

Schools have been provided with practical guidance and support around the safety measures that need to be in place in order to support safety in school for all. Understanding the importance of the safety measures that need to be in place requires clear messaging

and awareness-raising among school staff, parent and students. Younger children or those with special educational or additional needs may benefit from developmentally appropriate language and visual supports to help explain any new rules for staying safe at school. They may also need opportunities to practise the safety measures and routines.

- **Settling In:** It may take a little time for staff and students to settle in to the new school year. We are likely to see a variety of responses amongst our students ranging from excitement and happiness to worry and anxiety, which are normal responses. Normalising feelings by communicating that we all have concerns and worries will help to create a safe environment for students.
- 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. When talking with students it is helpful to reframe some of the negative discourse that they may be hearing by focusing, for example, on what they have learned and how they have managed. Focusing on what we have learned and what we can do next will build a sense of efficacy and agency.
- Some students will need some time to adjust to sitting, focusing and concentrating. For the first week shorter learning intervals, followed by regular, safe movement breaks (even standing up and stretching), will help to support increased concentration and focus., As always at the start of a new school year, all children and young people will benefit from time to engage in calming and regulating activities, such as physical activity, drawing, music and relaxation/breathing exercises. They also need plenty of sleep so emphasising for parents the importance of re-establishing school time routines such as bedtimes and winding-down activities will be important. In the first weeks back, a break from homework or keeping it to a minimum will help to reduce anxiety and allow children the time needed for rest and exercise following the school day.
- Different cohorts of students will require a different wellbeing focus:
  - Students taking State Examinations in 2022 may need particular support
  - Students with special or additional educational needs may need support to feel safe and to reconnect

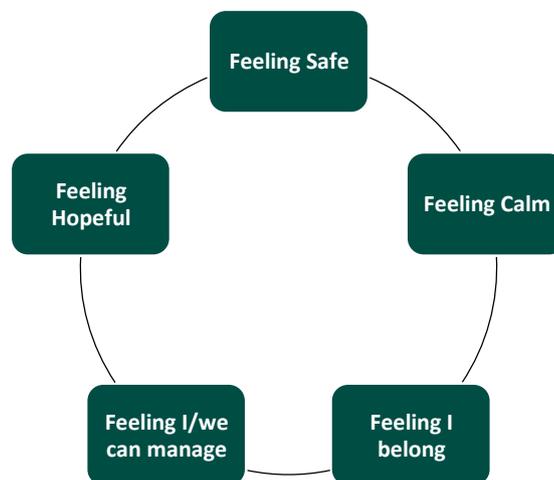
Take time as a school staff to consider the needs within your community, and how the school might best promote wellbeing in order to achieve the following:



## 2. Communicating Key Messages within the School Community:

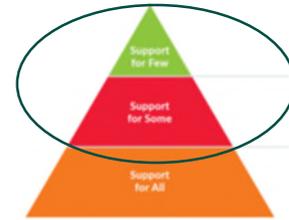
Key messages that may be considered for children and parents from their schools, that will support the wellbeing of the school community at this time include:

- Everyone is returning to school and schools are really looking forward to welcoming students back and helping them re-engage with learning.
- 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 once again get used to the 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 may 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.
- 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 short 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 include those who:

- are reluctant to attend school
- have been 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)
- due to domestic or socio-economic circumstances are at risk of educational disadvantage
- have experienced significant social isolation
- have become or are at risk of becoming disengaged from learning
- demonstrate behaviour that seems different or out of character

These students will require support that is in addition to the universal wellbeing supports being provided for all students. Some students' needs may have emerged over the course of this pandemic, while others may have had pre-existing needs. These students may find the return to school challenging and require additional support to help them to adjust and settle back in once again. Actively involving students in the planning for their return to schools will help reduce their worries and rebuild a sense of belonging and connection. Ensuring that students are provided with appropriate opportunities to re-engage with class teachers, special education teachers and special needs assistants, as appropriate, will help support the return to school. Existing student support plans, where available, should be reviewed and amended as appropriate. Where student support plans have not previously been provided, they should be developed in collaboration with parents to identify current strengths and needs and enhance the effectiveness of intervention planning.

For students who continue to struggle to re-engage with learning after the initial settling back period, 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 teaching and practising strategies such as deep breathing, relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, 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

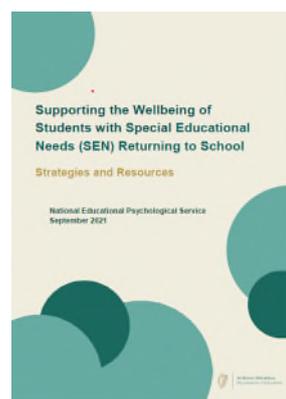
- Using targeted programmes to develop social and emotional competence
- Ensuring ongoing collaboration between parents, students and teachers.

For students at very high risk to Covid-19 who are unable to return to school immediately, distant learning supports will continue to be required. Further information will be available on the [gov.ie/backtoschool](http://gov.ie/backtoschool) webpage.

Regular on-line engagement between these students and their teachers will provide a sense of normality and connection, and contribute to the student's sense of wellbeing.

Schools may also consult with NEPS in relation to the academic, social and emotional needs of these students.

Further suggestions are available in the [NEPS Wellbeing Toolkit – Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs](#)



Schools will also be supported by the provision of a range of further guidance and support from Department of Education support services and agencies<sup>2</sup>, in particular NEPS and the NCSE ([www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie)) and HSE services. These are being communicated via the [gov.ie/backtoschool](http://gov.ie/backtoschool) webpage.

## 5. Promoting School Staff Wellbeing

Whole school approaches to wellbeing which include promoting a positive school culture and ethos, good relationships and a well-managed start of school year, can have a positive influence on staff 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. It is especially important, therefore, that adults in the school are proactive and look after their own wellbeing, and seek support if needed.

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<sup>2</sup> 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).

The Department recognises the need for school staff wellbeing and collective self-care. Support for school staff wellbeing is provided by the Department's Occupational Health Strategy which aims 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: Folláine Le Chéile*'.

Under the EAS, all school employees have access to a dedicated free confidential phoneline 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 family members (over the age of 18 years and living at home). A bespoke wellbeing portal and app which offers access to a Digital Gym, Live Chat, 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 is also providing a series of digital wellbeing events including live webinars with Q & A, see Section 8 for further information.

Within school settings all school staff will benefit from:

- Strong leadership with regard to the importance of wellbeing and a collaborative, collegial effort with regard to reopening and reengagement with teaching and learning
- Access to guidance and resources to build knowledge and awareness of how best to support the wellbeing of students
- Strategies to build collective staff wellness and resilience
- Knowing how and where to get support for students ([gov.ie/backtoschool](http://gov.ie/backtoschool)) and for themselves
- Kindness and compassion for themselves and others



## 6. Partnering with Parents/Carers

It is important to partner with families to ensure a whole school community, aligned response at the start of a new school year. Parents/carers will benefit from clear messages about:

- The arrangements in place to keep children/young people safe
- How the school will support the wellbeing of students
- Hearing positive messages in relation to lost learning and the need to catch up on months lost teaching. Reframe the language for parents with a focus on what has been learned, gained and the resilience that children and families have demonstrated. Families and children have been dealing with difficult times and are learning and surviving, despite the challenges they have faced;
- Being invited to share examples of new experiences and progress that their children have made;
- Being invited to share with the school any concerns or worries they may have about their children;
- Knowing how and where to get support. Lots of videos and information resources have been made available to support families, on [gov.ie/backtoschool](http://gov.ie/backtoschool).

## 7. Encouraging student voice and agency

It is important to provide ongoing opportunities for the voices of the children/ young people in a school to be heard, taken account of and given due weight, and responded to in a meaningful way. It is also important to involve students in the school plans at the start of a new school year. Students will benefit from clear messages, communicated in a meaningful and developmentally appropriate way, about:

- The arrangements in place to keep children/young people safe, and the rationale for these arrangements
- How the school will support their wellbeing, which will in turn support their reengagement with learning
- Their own responsibilities in helping to keep the school environment safe
- This 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 and letting them know how their views were taken into account.
- 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 their concerns or worries with relevant school personell, within a safe forum
- As appropriate to their age and stage of development, knowing how and where to get support ([gov.ie/backtoschool](http://gov.ie/backtoschool)).

## 8. 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 agencies<sup>3</sup>, and with the HSE/HSE-funded services to create an aligned and coherent package of supports and resources to assist schools in this regard. All supports are linked on [gov.ie/backtoschool](http://gov.ie/backtoschool).



The screenshot shows the gov.ie website interface. At the top is a navigation bar with 'gov.ie' and links for 'Departments', 'Consultations', 'Publications', 'Policies', and 'Languages'. Below this is a 'Publication' header. The main title is 'Wellbeing advice and resources during COVID-19'. It is attributed to the 'Department of Education', published on 27 August 2020, and last updated on 2 March 2021. A list of categories includes: 1. Parents - Primary Schools, 2. Parents - Post-primary Schools, 3. Students, 4. School Staff - Primary Schools, and 5. School Staff - Post-primary Schools. There are sections for 'Part of' (Campaigns, Back to School, Policies, Education) and 'Share' (Email, Facebook, Twitter). At the bottom, a note states: 'The Department of Education NEPS psychologists have developed the following advice and resources for parents, students and school staff to support them during COVID-19.'

Supports include:

- A short video clip to communicate with parents about the start of a new school year with key universal messages.
- Parent Advice: [here](#) and [here](#)
- A range of resources and supports for parents, student and school staff to support their wellbeing
- The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) has a wide range of CPD offerings, bespoke school support and online supports and resources available to support the implementation of a whole school wellbeing promotion process and which constitute an ongoing discussion with teachers in relation to wellbeing ([here](#)).
- Directory of Wellbeing CPD for primary, special and post-primary schools
- Catalogue of Wellbeing Resources for primary, special and post-primary schools

<sup>3</sup> 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).

- 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 (PDST) [here](#).
  - HSE's Health Promotion Team
  - HSE/HSE-funded service providers - e-mental health services, including free on-line counselling [here](#)

NEPS psychologists will continue to connect with schools, listen to their needs and engage with schools on how best to respond.

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

Finally, the HSE and 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](#).