

Circular 0016/2014

To: The Managerial Authorities of Recognised Primary, Secondary, Community and Comprehensive Schools and the Chief Executive Officers of Education and Training Boards (ETB)

Standardisation of the School Year in respect of Primary & Post-Primary Schools for the years 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17

1 Introduction

The purpose of this circular is to advise managerial authorities of the agreement that has been reached between the parties to the Teachers' Conciliation Council in relation to the standardisation of the breaks at Christmas, Easter and mid-term in the first and second terms for the school years 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17.

2 Factors taken into account

In reaching agreement the parties took account of a number of relevant factors:

- the objective of avoiding problems for families which can be caused by variation in closure arrangements where children are attending different schools
- the requirement for a school to be open for a minimum of 167 days at post-primary level and 183 days at primary level
- the date of the bank holiday in June and in consequence the effective end of the school year and commencement date of the Certificate Examinations
- the difference in the length of the school year at primary and post-primary level and the potential for a lengthy final term in the primary sector depending on when Easter falls
- the timing of the bank holiday in October
- the desirability of having a reasonable interval between the end of first term and Christmas
- the need to provide for contingency arrangements to deal with extensive or prolonged unforeseen school closures e.g. due to weather, etc.

3 General

The agreement reached covers the arrangements that will apply in all schools from the start of the 2014/15 school year and covers three school years. The parties will review the operation of the arrangements not later than the Autumn of 2016 for the purpose of agreeing the arrangements that will apply subsequently and have agreed that in the event that any unforeseen difficulty arises in relation to the operation of the arrangements now agreed the matter can be raised at the Teachers' Conciliation Council.

Schools are required to be open to receive all pupils on the weekday immediately preceding and immediately following each break period covered by this agreement.

The arrangements for 2014/15 onwards are set out in **Appendix A** of this circular.

In this circular "**school authority**" refers to the relevant managerial authority for the school concerned i.e. the relevant ETB in the case of ETB schools and board of management/manager in the case of all other schools.

4 Contingency arrangements in the event of unforeseen school closures

The parties have recognised that there is a need to include greater flexibility and to provide for contingency arrangements within the standardised school year to deal with unforeseen school closures.

Guidance for schools in relation to making up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures is included at **Appendix B** of this circular. This guidance sets out a structured approach to determining the measures to be put in place to make up for time lost. The guidance provides that subject to consensus at local level, any changes to normal practice that can be made to address the shortfalls should be put in place. Examples of how this might be achieved include:

- prioritising tuition over other non-tuition activities
- reducing where possible the length of mock/house examinations
- consideration of whether learning in the classroom should be prioritised over school tours, etc
- in the case of second level schools ensuring examination classes attend all classes to the end of May.

If necessary, the school authority should then identify any available discretionary days that the school had planned to close that could be made available to make up for time lost.

Where the above measures are not considered adequate, contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to extensive or prolonged unforeseen school closures may now also include either or both of the following:

- The February mid-term break may be reduced by up to three days subject to the requirement that all schools must be closed on the Thursday and Friday of the week in which this break falls.
- The Easter break may be reduced by up to three days by the school remaining open up to and including the Wednesday immediately preceding the Easter weekend. All schools must be closed on the Thursday and Friday immediately preceding the Easter weekend and remain closed for the remainder of the Easter break as set out in **Appendix A** of this circular.

The school authority must also take into account the need to provide adequate notice of any changes to the school calendar to pupils, parents and staff. Each school authority shall also provide to parents, at the beginning of each year, a calendar which includes details of school closures. It should be made clear that the calendar could be subject to change as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures.

5 Religious observance and standardisation

The above arrangements are agreed without prejudice to closure on specific days, subject to the overall requirement of 167 days at post-primary level and 183 days at primary level, dictated by religious observance that is required in schools under the patronage of different denominations or faiths.

6 Extent of flexibility outside of the standardised breaks

It is not a requirement of this agreement that the commencement or end of the school year either at primary or post-primary level should be standardised. However while schools may use their discretionary days, where available, to determine the precise start and end of the school year, it is recognised the commencement of Certificate Examinations will mean that post-primary schools will not be open for tuition beyond the Friday preceding the June bank holiday in any year. The expectation is that the school year will normally commence during the week in which 1st September falls. However, the school year may commence in the week prior to that in which 1st September falls where this is necessary in order to meet the overall requirement of a minimum of 167 at post-primary level or 183 days at primary level. Schools are reminded that any day on which a school completes less than a full school day's instruction shall not be counted as a full school day for the purposes of meeting the overall requirements of 167 days at post-primary or 183 days at primary level.

The arrangements may provide some limited flexibility to schools on certain other days outside of the defined periods. The scheduling of such days must not be used to extend or modify the periods set out in this circular in respect of mid-term, Christmas or Easter breaks save where religious observance requirements of a school under a particular patronage make this necessary.

7 Public Service Agreement (Croke Park Agreement) and Public Service Stability Agreement (Haddington Road Agreement)

The Public Service Agreement (Croke Park Agreement) made provision for additional time of one hour per week and this requirement continues under the Public Service Stability Agreement (Haddington Road Agreement). Any aggregation of these hours (subject to consensus among the school staff) into full school days will necessitate attendance by teaching staff on days outside of the 183 and 167 tuition days required at primary and post-primary respectively. Circular 08/2011 provides that at primary level aggregation into full days is subject to a maximum aggregation of the equivalent of two full days.

The contingency arrangements for the February mid-term and Easter breaks do not preclude a school from identifying any of these days for the purposes of aggregation of hours. However, schools should ensure that an alternative arrangement for the use of the aggregated hours can be activated if changes are subsequently required as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures.

8. Queries in relation to this circular

Queries in relation to this circular should be emailed to:

schoolgovernance@education.gov.ie

9. Dissemination of circular

A copy of this circular should be provided to members of the board of management and the staff of the school. A copy should also be provided to the parents association. This circular may be accessed on the Department of Education and Skills website at www.education.ie. An Irish version of this circular is also available on the Department's website.

Hubert Loftus
Principal Officer
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21 February 2014

Appendix A: Standardised school years 2014/15 onwards

The following are the agreed arrangements in respect of the standardisation of the breaks at Christmas, Easter and mid-term in the first and second terms for the school years 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17:

School Year 2014/15

October 2014 mid-term break

All schools will close from **Monday 27th October 2014 to Friday 31st October 2014** inclusive.

Christmas 2014

All schools will close on **Friday 19th December 2014**, which will be the final day of the school term.

All schools will re-open on **Monday 5th January 2015**.

February 2015 mid-term break

All primary schools will close on **Thursday 19th February 2015 and Friday 20th February 2015**. (Primary schools may use 3 discretionary days to extend this break to an alternative option of a 5 day break for the period from **Monday 16th February 2015 to Friday 20th February 2015** inclusive unless changes are required as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures.)

Post-primary schools will close from **Monday 16th February 2015 to Friday 20th February 2015** inclusive unless changes are required as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures.

Where contingency arrangements are required a school authority may reduce the length of the February mid-term break by remaining open up to and including **Wednesday 18th February 2015**.

Easter 2015

All schools will close on **Friday 27th March 2015**, which will be the final day of the school term, unless changes are required as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures. Where contingency arrangements are required a school authority may reduce the length of the Easter break by remaining open up to and including **Wednesday 1st April 2015**.

All schools will re-open on **Monday 13th April 2015**.

School Year 2015/16

October 2015 mid-term break

All schools will close from **Monday 26th October 2015 to Friday 30th October 2015** inclusive.

Christmas 2015

All schools will close on **Tuesday 22nd December 2015**, which will be the final day of the school term.

All schools will re-open on **Wednesday 6th January 2016**.

February 2016 mid-term break

All primary schools will close on **Thursday 18th February 2016 and Friday 19th February 2016**. (Primary schools may use 3 discretionary days to extend this break to an alternative option of a 5 day break for the period from **Monday 15th February 2016 to Friday 19th February 2016** inclusive unless changes are required as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures.)

Post-primary schools will close from **Monday 15th February 2016 to Friday 19th February 2016** inclusive unless changes are required as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures.

Where contingency arrangements are required a school authority may reduce the length of the February mid-term break by remaining open up to and including **Wednesday 17th February 2016**.

Easter 2016

All schools will close on **Wednesday 16th March 2016** which will be the final day of the school term, unless changes are required as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures. Where contingency arrangements are required a school authority may reduce the length of the Easter break by remaining open up to and including **Wednesday 23rd March 2016**.

All schools will re-open on **Monday 4th April 2016**.

School Year 2016/17

October 2016 mid-term break

All schools will close from **Monday 31st October 2016 to Friday 4th November 2016** inclusive.

Christmas 2016

All schools will close on **Thursday 22nd December 2016**, which will be the final day of the school term.

All schools will re-open on **Monday 9th January 2017**.

February 2017 mid-term break

All primary schools will close on **Thursday 23rd February 2017 and Friday 24th February 2017**. (Primary schools may use 3 discretionary days to extend this break to an alternative option of a 5 day break for the period from **Monday 20th February 2017 to Friday 24th February 2017** inclusive unless changes are required as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures.)

Post-primary schools will close from **Monday 20th February 2017 to Friday 24th February 2017** inclusive unless changes are required as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures.

Where contingency arrangements are required a school authority may reduce the length of the February mid-term break by remaining open up to and including **Wednesday 22nd February 2017**.

Easter 2017

All schools will close on **Friday 7th April 2017**, which will be the final day of the school term, unless changes are required as part of contingency arrangements to make up for time lost due to unforeseen school closures. Where contingency arrangements are required a school authority may reduce the length of the Easter break by remaining open up to and including **Wednesday 12th April 2017**.

All schools will re-open on **Monday 24th April 2017**.

Appendix B: Guidance for schools in relation to making up for time lost due to unforeseen closures

1. The school authority should, in the first instance, quantify the number of school closures that have occurred.
2. The school authority should, in consultation with the Principal and teachers, assess the effect of the loss of tuition and identify any shortfalls that have occurred as a result of the unforeseen closures.
3. The school authority should consult with the Principal and teachers with a view to ensuring that the curriculum for each class/year group can be completed before year end. Subject to consensus at local level, any changes to normal practice that can be made to facilitate such work should be put in place. A non-exhaustive list of possible examples of how this might be achieved include:
 - prioritising tuition over other non-tuition activities
 - reducing where possible the length of mock/house examinations
 - consideration of whether learning in the classroom should be prioritised over school tours, etc.
 - in the case of second level schools ensuring examination classes attend all classes to the end of May.
4. If necessary, the school authority should review the school calendar with a view to identifying any available discretionary days that the school had planned to close that could be made available to make up the loss. In this regard, the school authority should take into account the need to provide adequate notice of any changes to the school calendar to pupils, parents and staff.

5. In cases where a school has been affected by extensive or prolonged school closures (e.g. due to weather, etc.) and where the school authority considers that the above measures will not adequately address the loss in tuition involved, the school authority may, having established what arrangements for school transport may or may not be feasible if other schools are remaining closed, decide to implement either or both of the following contingency arrangements:
 - the February mid-term break may be reduced by up to three days subject to the requirement that all schools must be closed on the Thursday and Friday of the week in which this break falls
 - the Easter break may be reduced by up to three days by the school remaining open up to and including the Wednesday immediately preceding the Easter weekend. All schools must be closed on the Thursday and Friday immediately preceding the Easter weekend and remain closed for the remainder of the Easter break as set out in **Appendix A** of this circular.
6. The school authority should consider the implications of any measures identified for pupils, teachers, parents and other staff and also other parties such as school transport, bus escorts, traffic wardens, visitors to the school, etc.
7. The school authority should consult and communicate with the school community as early as possible on this matter.