

Subject: School Exceptional Closure Days

Circular Number: 2024/12
Date of Issue: 27 August 2024

Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided schools;
- Education Authority;
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education;
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta;
- Governing Bodies Association;
- Controlled Schools Support Council;
- Catholic Schools Trustee Service; and
- Teacher Unions.

Summary of Contents:

The main purpose of this circular is to provide advice and guidance on the use of exceptional school closure days. It should act as a reminder to school leaders and Boards of Governors of the very limited circumstances when an exceptional closure is relevant, the need to plan ahead particularly when circumstances may change and the minimum legal requirement in terms of the number of teaching days and number of hours teaching per day.

Reference is also made to “Remote Learning”.

Status of Contents:
Advice
Information for schools

Related Documents:
Circular 2024/08

Enquiries:

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Expiry Date: None

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SCHOOL EXCEPTIONAL CLOSURE DAYS

Introduction

1. This circular provides advice on the circumstances in which the Department will consider a request from a school for an exceptional closure day.

Background in terms of number of required opening / teaching days

- a) Under statute, a grant-aided school must be in operation for 200 days per year, less:
 - a. 10 optional holidays; and
 - b. any exceptional closures sanctioned by DE (the 'Ministry').
- b) During operational days, pupils under eight must be under instruction for no less than three hours increasing to four and a half hours for pupils aged eight or over. The minimum instruction time does not include religious instruction or lunch breaks.
- c) Teachers are required to be available for work on 195 days, of which no more than 190 days should involve teaching children in the classroom.
- d) The five days when teachers are in school, but pupils are not, are designated as professional learning days and are known to many in the education system as 'Baker Days' – their use is decided by the school principal.
- e) The teachers' terms and conditions of employment, which specified the above working days, superseded the original legislation on school operational days and, in practice, removed the flexibility for optional holidays.
- f) The Minister exceptionally in 2024/25, sanctioned the use of up to five additional non-contact days for the purposes of whole school improvement known as School Development Days (SDDs), pending a review of the use of Baker Days and SDDs and potential legislative change around operational days.
- g) Pupils will therefore be taught between 185 and 190 days depending upon the number of School Development Days their school avails of.
- h) In exceptional circumstances, which are entirely outside the control of the school, schools can apply to the Department for a reduction in the number of days they are required to operate – known as an 'exceptional closure day'. These closures are for unexpected or unplanned for events¹. For example, electricity failure, burst pipe or the death of someone working in or attending the school. Although the approval of an exceptional closure day will reduce the number of operational days of a school, it has no impact on the allowances set out for Baker days and SDDs.
- i) The Department expects schools to have due regard to the impact of exceptional closures on pupils' learning and would encourage schools to do all they can to recover lost teaching time due to exceptional circumstances, particularly where the number of operational days fall below 185. For example, where schools have planned to take their full five SDDs, they could reconsider these days in light of the number of exceptional closures during the year.

2. It is worth noting that the education system relies on Boards of Governors to verify at the end of the year that the pupils in their school have been taught for the requisite 185 full days of instruction in line with their age group. It is the responsibility of each Board of Governors to provide the necessary assurance statements, as requested

¹ The only exception to an exceptional closure being unexpected is when a school is being used as a polling station for parliamentary/local government elections.

by EA, to confirm that their school has satisfactorily complied with all aspects of this circular, and relevant aspects of circulars outlined below.

Summary Reference Table

195 days	Number of days teachers are required to be available for work.
Less 5 Baker days	Professional learning days, often referred to as 'Baker Days', when pupils are not in attendance at school.
190 days	Maximum number of days that teachers' work should involve teaching pupils in a classroom situation.
Less up to 5 days²	Schools can choose to avail of up to five School Development Days (granted exceptionally by DE Minister)
185 days	Minimum number of days on which pupils will be taught in 2024/25

Other useful Circulars

3. DE Circular 2024/08 – School Development Days in 2024/25. Queries in respect of SDDs should be directed to DESit@education-ni.gov.uk

Planning the Operational Calendar

4. EA is responsible for approving the Easter, Christmas, Bank Holiday, mid-term and summer holiday closures for schools and the days proposed as non-operational in utilising Baker days and SDDs. Proposals in respect of how the SDDs will be utilised should also be submitted to the EA in advance. In fulfilling these responsibilities, EA is expected to ensure that all schools are able to meet the statutory requirements in relation to days of operation.

5. It remains the responsibility of the board of governors of each school to develop its calendar in accordance with all information issued by EA regarding such closures, and to provide the necessary assurance statements requested by EA to confirm that their school has satisfactorily complied with all aspects of this circular, and relevant aspects of circulars outlined above.

Remote Learning

6. Before considering applying for an exceptional closure, schools may wish to consider whether learning from home or "remote learning" is a realistic alternative. If deemed appropriate, schools would not be required to apply for an exceptional closure but plan instead as to how remote learning for a limited number of days would be best delivered. Pupils should be marked as present provided that sufficient evidence is provided as required by the school. DE Circular 2022/16 on Remote Learning can be found [here](#).

² Where the school opts to avail of fewer than the maximum of 5 School Development Days available, pupils must be taught in the school on each of the remainder of the 5 days.

Exceptional closures (Unexpected or unplanned for events)

7. The Department will consider an application for a reduction in the days on which a school must be in operation to take account of exceptional circumstances or where the closing of the whole school is outside the control of the school authorities, for example, due to:

- The death of a teacher or pupil at the school;
- Flooding or burst pipes at the school;
- Electricity failure;
- Damage to school;
- Severe weather conditions e.g. heavy snowfall; or
- The only exception to an exceptional closure being unexpected is when a school is being used as a polling station for parliamentary/local government elections.

School closure in event of Industrial Action

8. In light of industrial action over recent years which led to some schools to close, the following additional guidance is provided to support school principals and Boards of Governors in their decision making process regarding closure.

9. The Department would encourage all school principals to consider the risks associated with closing a school entirely and the impact on the teaching and learning of those children who do not require specialist support.

10. Where the proportion of pupils requiring specialist support is small, exceptional closures may not be appropriate. There are absence codes available to exempt these pupils from attendance. This would enable the teaching and learning of other pupils who do not require specialist support to continue unaffected.

11. Decisions regarding exceptional closures are made at the discretion of the school principal in conjunction with the Board of Governors (BoG). We would ask school principals / BoGs to consider the above when considering exceptional closures in these specific circumstances.

12. Where the school principal / BoG of a school believes that an exceptional closure in such circumstances is appropriate, the procedure as outlined below should be followed. In such circumstances, the reason "Other" should be used and the Department will then consider the request in light of the evidence provided.

Failure to meet all the protocols may result in the exceptional closure being refused.

13. The Department has developed an online application for schools to apply for an exceptional closure which should help to expedite the process. The application can be found at the following link: <http://apps.education-ni.gov.uk/appExclos/default.aspx> .

14. Schools must first register to use the application. A step-by-step guide is included at Annex A. Should you have any difficulties in accessing this application, please contact the Department by email at attendance@education-ni.gov.uk or by telephone at 02891 279328.

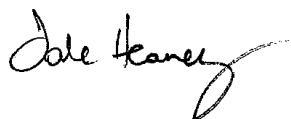
15. School Principals are required to have in place an agreed communications method for informing parents/guardians, school staff, school authorities and the Department of Education about school closures. All contact details need to be up to date and parents and staff should be made aware of the agreed communication method.

16. The Department expects schools to have due regard to the impact of exceptional closures on pupils' learning and would encourage schools to do all they can to recover lost teaching time due to exceptional circumstances, particularly where the number of operational days fall below 185. For example, where schools have planned to take their full 5 School Development Days, they could reconsider these days in light of the number of exceptional closures during the year. The Department is continuing to keep the applications and reasons for exceptional closure under close scrutiny.

17. For guidance on adding an exceptional closure in SIMS please refer to the Attendance Help Sheet on C2KExchange.

<https://www.c2kexchange.net/documentcentre/Documents/Attendance - Helpsheet.pdf>

18. Exceptional Closures are assessed and monitored by DE. Once schools receive approval of an exceptional closure from DE and enter this into SIMS the relevant NIDirect webpage containing a list of schools closed will be updated (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/school-closures>).



Dale Heaney
Head of Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team

Annex A - Automated Application for applying for an Exceptional Closure

Exceptional Closures are for **full day** closure only where the school is **closed to both pupils and staff**.

Step 1- Register

<http://apps.education-ni.gov.uk/appExclos/default.aspx>

Register your school here using your DENI reference number and the email address of the person who would normally apply to DE for an exceptional closure to be considered.

Register here

In order to use this service we need some information from you.

First we need your e-mail address to verify that it is you using this service. When you submit the information using the button at the bottom of this page, we will send a message to the e-mail address you have given us. The information we give you in this e-mail will allow you to complete your registration. Please allow a few minutes for the e-mail to arrive. If it takes longer than this, ensure that it hasn't been filtered into your junk e-mail folder before contacting us.

Now, enter your Department of Education reference number (in the form XXXXXXX, omitting any dash or slash).

Next, copy the numbers from the image you see into the box below and press SUBMIT to continue.

When you click on submit, you should receive a response, confirming that you have been registered

Thank you for registering!

Thank you for registering to notify Department of Education of an exceptional closure. Please check the email account you used to register for this application for an email from us with further instructions. It may take a few minutes for it to arrive.

Step 2 - Authenticate

Note, your password will be automatically assigned to you and it will need to be kept safely. You cannot change this password however if you forget it, there is a password re-set option available.

Thank you for registering to complete an exceptional closure return for your school.

This email contains further information to enable you to complete the process.

Clicking on the following link will enable you to authenticate your registration:

[Click here](#)

When you have authenticated your account, you will be asked to log in to complete your return. You should log in using your email address and the following password:

1d9be98431f

If your email client does not support HTML, you can paste this link into your browser address bar:

<http://localhost:60194/authenticate.aspx?user=f489d266-1e73-a65b-6ab3-bd32da16dc5e>

Please retain this email in your records for future reference. Thank you for participating in this process!

When you click on the “Click here” line, you should get the following response

Account authenticated

Thank you for authenticating your registration. [Click here](#) to be redirected to the login page where you can log in to the Exclos application and submit a return.

Step 3 – Enter an Exceptional Closure Date and select a reason for closure

In order to register an exceptional closure, use your registered email address and automatically assigned password to logon.

Please sign in

For a password reminder, [click here](#).

[Click here to register](#)

Enter the date of the exceptional closure and select the reason for closure.

Reason for exceptional closure

We need you to give us some details about the closure.

First tell us the date you closed, or plan to close, [Named School] on in the box below.

13/12/2018

Now, select the reason for the exceptional closure. If the reason is other than those given in the examples below, please select other and tell us in the box below.

- Adverse weather
- Use as a polling station
- Utilities failure (e.g. water, electricity)
- Death of a member of staff, pupil or another person working at the school
- Other

Submit

If the reason for closure is anything other than “Other”, you will receive an email back, confirming that your request has been approved.



Thank you for your request for an exceptional closure.

The Department of Education has received your request for an exceptional closure. We will consider your application and let you know the outcome as soon as possible. Please note that the minimum number of days for an exceptional closure is 10 days.

ACCEPTANCE of your application has been received by the Education Authority, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and Teachers' Payment Form 1.

Please [logout](#) of the application.

If you select “Other”, you must provide more details as to the reason for the school closure.

Reason for exceptional closure

We need you to give us some details about the closure.

First tell us the date you closed, or plan to close, [Named School] will be in the box below.

13/12/2018

Now, select the reason for the exceptional closure. If the reason is other than those given in the examples below, please select other and tell us in the box below.

- Adverse weather
- Use as a polling station
- Utilities failure (e.g. water, electricity)
- Death of a member of staff, pupil or another person working at the school
- Other

Type your reason in
this box!

Submit

Once an exceptional closure under “Other” has been submitted, you will receive the following message:

Thank you for your request for an exceptional closure.

Your request has been forwarded to the Tackling Educational Disadvantage team in Department of Education for consideration, and a response will issue as soon as possible.

[Please logout of the application.](#)

In such cases, the Department will consider this request and respond as soon as possible.