

Subject:**SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT DAYS
2025/26 ACADEMIC YEAR****Circular Number: 2025/04****Date of Issue: 10 April 2025****Target Audience:**

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all grant-aided schools;
- Education Authority (EA);
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS);
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG);
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE);
- Governing Bodies Association;
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA);
- General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI);
- Controlled Schools' Support Council; and
- Teacher Unions.

Governor Awareness:

Essential

Status of Contents:For information and
action by schools**Related Documents:**

DE Circular 2016/04
2016/04 Addendum
2016/04 2nd Addendum
2016/04 3rd Addendum
DE Circular 2021/08
DE Circular 2022/06
DE Circular 2023/09
DE Circular 2024/08

Summary of Contents:

This circular, issued by the Department of Education, sets out the arrangements for schools to take up to five School Development Days in the 2025/26 school year.

Expiry Date: 31 July 2026**Enquiries:**

Any enquiries about the content of this circular should be addressed to:

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SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT DAYS 2025/26 ACADEMIC YEAR

Introduction

1. The purpose of this circular is to advise that the Department of Education (DE) is providing exceptional approval to enable schools to take up to five additional days (referred to as School Development Days or SDDs) for the purposes of school improvement and school/staff development in the 2025/26 academic year only. The expiry date for use of these days will be 31 July 2026.

Purpose of School Development Days

2. SDDs are intended to be used for self-evaluation and continuing professional development in pursuit of school improvement and raising of standards and should continue to be used for this purpose during 2025/26.
3. The continuation of this provision recognises the time that is needed to support the School Development Planning process and matters identified in School Development Plans (SDPs) as priorities for whole school development and improvement involving all staff, teaching and non-teaching, in planned development activities. These activities include:
 - schools' engagement in rigorous self-evaluation, taking account of data and other evidence, in support of school improvement and the raising of standards and closing of the gap between those most and least disadvantaged and between boys and girls, particularly standards in literacy and numeracy;
 - the continued delivery of the statutory curriculum;
 - the continued implementation and delivery of the entitlement framework in post-primary schools;
 - the development of whole-school strategies and systems for early identification of all barriers to learning for children with special and other additional needs;

- the development of school-based provision to meet the individual needs of all children presenting with barriers to learning, including the promotion of pupils' emotional health and well-being;
 - issues related to the professional development, health, attendance and well-being of staff, including Performance Review and Staff Development (PRSD);
 - the use of ICT in enhancing learning, teaching and assessment, continuing professional development and school leadership and management; and
 - promoting effective links with parents and the community - this does NOT include parent/teacher consultations or pupil report writing.
4. Staff development sessions should also be regularly and systematically evaluated to ascertain their impact and effectiveness on school improvement, with the outcomes of evaluation feeding into the SDP process.

Allocation and Management of SDDs

5. The utilisation of SDDs reduces the days in which pupils are engaged in learning. It is therefore essential that schools reflect carefully before deciding on the number of SDDs they wish to take and also satisfy themselves that the closure minimises disruption to pupils' learning. Parents and pupils should be given as much advance notice of closure dates as possible.
6. The exceptional approval for the provision of SDDs reduces the minimum number of school operational days from 190 days down to 185 days (if all five days are used).
7. Schools are reminded of the statutory requirement that, during the operational days, pupils are required to be in school, under instruction, for a minimum of three hours each day if they are under eight years old. Pupils over the age of eight years are required to be in school each day for a minimum of four and a half hours, under instruction, separated by a break of thirty minutes. The minimum instruction time does not include time spent receiving religious education.

8. As per normal procedure, schools should submit written proposals (dates and content) each year for the SDDs provided to the School Development Service (SDS) in the Education Authority (EA). There should be a clear and transparent link between schools' SDPs and how SDDs are utilised for the purposes of school improvement. Submission of this information will inform policy development and the most effective and efficient delivery of advice and support from the EA. This request will issue from the EA under separate cover.
9. As well as recording the details in their SDP, schools should also include information about SDDs in their Board of Governors' Annual Report. The report should include details of the days on which the school was closed and outline the main activities carried out on each day.
10. It is the responsibility of school principals to ensure that SDDs are used appropriately for whole school and staff development and to assure themselves that the use of SDDs is having a positive impact on school improvement.
11. SDDs are intended to be used as a full day in school when all staff work together on school improvement related work. The use of twilight sessions after school as an alternative to full day SDDs is strongly discouraged.
12. Definitions of Baker Days, SDDs and Exceptional Closure days and further guidance around school improvement can be found in 'A Guide for Governors' on the DE website at the following link: [Guide to governor roles and responsibilities](#) (opens in a new window).

Review of the use of Baker Days and SDDs

13. The Department's [TransformED NI strategy for teaching and learning excellence](#) contains a commitment to review the use of Baker Days and SDDs. The review will determine whether SDDs should become a feature of the education system on a permanent basis, requiring legislative change, and how best such days can support improvement coherently and efficiently across the education system.

14. This review is already well progressed and the emerging proposals will be included in the consultation exercise on the draft School Improvement Policy and Delivery Plan.

15. The Department is also, concurrently, considering the important issue for staff in special schools and specialist provisions of the additional staff training required to meet the growing complexity of needs, particularly medical needs, of the pupils in their care. A range of potential approaches are being considered to support school staff as part of this work.

Kathryn Menary
School Improvement Team