



Department of

Education

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Subject: School days and hours of operation

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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;
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment
- Catholic Schools Trustee Service; and
- Teacher Unions.

Summary of Contents:

This circular provides the most up to date advice on the number of full days schools must be open to all pupils and the minimum hours of instruction.

Enquiries:

This circular cuts across multiple areas of responsibility across the Department however enquiries can be addressed in the first instance to:
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Status of Contents:
Advice

Related Documents:

[Circular 2024/12](#)
[Circular 2024/13](#)
[Circular 2025/04](#)

Superseded Documents:

Circular 2013/09

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1. Introduction

1. This circular provides guidance on the number of full days schools must be open to all pupils and the minimum number of daily hours of instruction that are required to be met in order for the day to be counted within the minimum 190 days of operation.
2. Schools will know that in order to maintain the very highest levels of education in Northern Ireland all pupils should receive the maximum amount of teaching time available. Equity of access to learning opportunities for all children and young people is essential to ensuring that every child has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.
3. Regular pupil attendance at school is an on-going challenge which was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. This has resulted in a growing number of children and young people within our schools who, for various reasons, find attending school every day, very challenging and who need extra support. The Department has published for consultation a new draft 'Attendance Matters' strategy to improve school attendance and understand the reasons behind pupil absence.
4. As we seek to emphasise the importance of school attendance to parents and children, it is important that as a system we create confidence that schools are seeking to maximise teaching and learning time and, for example, minimise the disruption of half days and early closures.
5. A consistent school year supports pupils to develop essential knowledge and skills and progress in their learning. It is also important to maximise the teaching time available to support pupils to maintain social routines providing stability and structure.

2. Number of operational / teaching days

6. Legally, **every school is required to be open** and operational, providing instruction to pupils for a defined number of hours, **for a minimum of 190 days**, less any exceptional closures sanctioned by the Department of Education (DE).
7. [The Jordanstown Agreement](#) also specifies that full time teachers are required to be available for work on 195 days, of which no more than 190, should involve teaching pupils in the classroom.

8. The five non-teaching days when teachers are in school, but pupils are not, are commonly known as 'Baker Days'. The Principal of each school determines how they are used. Commonly the days are designated for undertaking school-based training, development and improvement activities on a whole-school, departmental or individual teacher basis.
9. Therefore, in a normal academic year, where the Department grants no additional exceptional closures, **it is expected that schools should be open to all pupils for 190 full days teaching**, providing the statutory minimum hours of instruction on each day.
10. In recent years, the Department has granted a reduction of up to five School Development Days and exceptionally in the remainder of 2025/26 and during 2026/27 schools have been granted permission to close to pupils for one day per term to engage in TransformED Development Days due to the significant programme for change underway. This has **temporarily reduced the requirement to 183 days in the 2025/26 academic year and 182 days in 2026/27**. It is further recognised that pupils in Years 12 and 14 undertaking public examinations may be granted study leave (see section below).

3. EA Operational Days

11. During term two, on an annual basis, the Education Authority (EA) provides a list of non-operational dates during which school transport, school meals and EA non-hazardous waste contracted collection services will **not** operate in the forthcoming academic year. The services are generally made available from 1 September to 30 June with a number of breaks around typical holiday periods and recognised public or bank holidays. The total number of days when services are available between 1 September and 30 June is always in excess of the 190 minimum days.
12. **Schools should make every effort to maintain their school calendar within the days when services are operational** as this is particularly important for those pupils entitled to free school meals and pupils who require access to home to school transport arrangements. Should a school choose to open to pupils on an EA non-operational day, it is important that parents and carers are made aware of any restricted transport to ensure pupils can travel to and from school safely.
13. The Department and the EA recognise that, in recent years, there is a direction of travel across a majority of schools to open earlier than the start of September with longer mid-term breaks. Consideration is therefore being given to the feasibility of amending the days on which services are available in future years.

4. School Development Days

14. In recent years, the Department has provided additional exceptional provision for all schools to use up to five School Development Days (SDDs) **for the purposes of whole school improvement.**
15. The Department has undertaken a [review of the use of Baker Days and SDDs](#) and has concluded that additional non-contact days have considerable benefits and consideration should be given to their provision in the longer-term. The Department will progress legislative change to create flexibility for this provision however the learning from the review indicated a need for greater stipulation around how and when the days are used.
16. In the interim, the Minister has agreed to provide five SDDs in 2026/27 and further detail on this provision will follow under cover of a separate Circular.
17. In instances where SDDs are granted and depending on the number of SDDs that schools avail of, the number of days that pupils are taught in the classroom may **vary from 185 to 190 days.** Where a school decides not to use all or some of its SDDs it must remain open as normal to pupils.
18. Schools are reminded that SDDs should only be used for **school improvement and professional development activities** including self-evaluation, strategic planning and review and staff development activity.
19. It is apparent that, in the exceptional circumstances of Covid-19 and industrial action, more flexibility was applied to the use of SDDs. Schools should now revert to the original intended use of these SDDs. SDDs should not be used for activities such as parent-teacher interviews, marking, report writing or other routine administrative tasks.
20. SDDs are intended to be used as a full day and should take place during the hours of the normal school day school as an opportunity for all of the school staff to focus on improvement and professional development. **The use of twilight sessions after school as an alternative to full day SDDs is not permitted** except with the prior approval in advance from the Department in exceptional circumstances only.

5. TransformED Development Days

21. In 2026-27, the Department will also exceptionally grant three TransformED Development Days, with one to be taken each term across the academic year as follows:

- Term 1 - Friday 25 September 2026
- Term 2 – Monday 25 January 2027
- Term 3 – Tuesday 4 May 2027

22. Schools may use them to engage with **any aspect of the TransformedED programme**, including:

- Curriculum including literacy and numeracy
- Qualifications
- Assessment
- School improvement
- Teacher professional learning
- Tackling educational disadvantage

23. The Department will provide further materials to support these days in advance of the new academic year.

6. Exceptional Closure Days

24. The number of teaching days can be reduced further if a school applies to, and receives approval from, the Department for an “Exceptional Closure”. Such closures are unforeseen/unplanned and are outside the control of the school authorities. For example, in periods of extreme weather; the death of a member of staff or pupil at the school; flooding or burst pipes; electricity failure; or if the school is to be used as a polling station for parliamentary/local government elections.

25. Such closures must be approved by the Department of Education. Information regarding the qualifying circumstances and the process to apply for these can be found in [Circular 2024/12](#).

26. Exceptional Closure Days are not for the purposes of planned events, such as capital works or moving to new premises, rather, in circumstances such as these, settings should consider a temporary move to remote learning. In very limited circumstances where this is not possible, schools may apply for an “Exceptional Closure” and that will be considered on a case by case basis by the Department.

27. 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. For example, where schools have planned to take all five optional School Development Days, they could reconsider these days in light of the number of exceptional closures during the year.

7. Summary Reference Table – Days of Operation

195 days	Number of days teachers are required to be available for work.
Less 5 Baker days	Non-contact days when teachers are working but pupils are not in attendance at school.
190 days	Statutory minimum full days of school operation and maximum number of days that teachers provide instruction in a classroom situation.
Less up to 5 SDDs	Currently schools can choose to avail of up to five School Development Days (granted closures by DE Minister).
Less up to 3 TDDs	Exceptionally in terms 2 and 3 of 2025/26 (dates flexible) and during the 2026/27 school year (aligned, specified dates), the Minister has provided for schools to avail of one TransformED Development Day (TDD) per term.
182 days in 2026/27	Minimum number of full days on which pupils will be taught annually if SDDs and TDDs are granted and utilised.
Less than 182 days	Where the school has applied to the Department and approval has been granted for Exceptional Closure Day(s) for unplanned/unforeseen events.

8. Minimum hours of instruction

28. Legislation sets out the minimum hours of instruction to be provided on each of the days a school is in operation.

29. **All pupils should be under instruction (see definition below), other than in religious education, for a total period of not less than:**

- **3 hours** in the case of a pupil enrolled in a class composed mainly of pupils who, at the beginning of the school year, had not attained the age of 8 years (years 1-3 only); and
- **4.5 hours** in the case of any other pupil - made up of two sessions separated by a period of not less than half an hour.

30. In the case of a grant-aided school or setting at which **pre-school education** is provided, legislation¹ stipulates that full-time pre-school education is normally provided for at least 4 hours and 30 minutes on each school day, and part-time pre-school education is normally provided for less than that amount of time but for at least 2 hours and 30 minutes on each school day.

¹ [Education \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1998, Article 22](#)

31. Pupils are considered to be ‘under instruction’ whilst engaging with the curriculum under the instruction of a qualified teacher including physical activity but excluding religious education. This can include any time occupied by a pupil in undergoing inspection or treatment under arrangements for medical and dental inspection etc; in attending an examination; or taking part in organised games on not more than one day in any week in accordance with an approved timetable.
32. Taking account of the minimum hours of instruction (which exclude religious instruction), time for registration, assembly and relevant snack/lunch breaks from lessons (which must include a minimum of 30 minutes between the morning and afternoon sessions); it is expected that the **length of the school day and minimum hours of attendance for pupils under eight should be four and a half hours and for pupils aged eight and over at least six hours.**
33. In line with legislation, the minimum hours of instruction and attendance must be met on each school day. Schools should not have routinely shortened days of attendance. Asymmetrical weeks are not considered appropriate practice and place undue pressure on parents and carers and create challenges for pupils using transport services.
34. Days when schools are **not open to all pupils** and instead open only to specific year groups (for example pupils receiving external examination results, parent teacher meetings, internal examinations, options days, careers fairs) **cannot be considered as an operational day** for the school. Schools should keep such days to an absolute minimum.

9. Half days and early closures

35. Schools should endeavour to keep the use of half days to a minimum. Half days are disruptive for working parents, create challenges for safe transport home, reduce access to free school meals and are a deterrent to attendance generally. Where half days are used, a **second half day** is required in order to create **one** of the minimum days of operation.
36. Early closures for events such as parent-teacher interviews should be kept to a minimum. **If the minimum hours of instruction are not met on a given day, it must be recorded as a half day.**
37. Schools should also remain cognisant of implications for their pupils’ school to home transport if it is deemed essential to close early and the safeguarding risk should pupils be left unsupervised.

10. Staggered start dates

38. Learning to Learn - A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning included an action for the Department of Education to issue guidance on reducing the length of settling in time for pre-school and Year 1 to take account of the child's previous experience. Detailed guidance was developed in 2015 and is available [here](#).
39. The majority of pupils should be settled into the pre-school setting within the first two to three weeks of September (dependent on the number of classes per setting, class size and staff ratio), with **all pupils attending daily, for their full session, no later than the end of September**. Pupils should attend consistently and regularly i.e. every day as their time is increased.
40. For full time sessions, it is expected that the majority of pupils should be staying for meals within four weeks of their start date. It is particularly important that pupils entitled to free school meals are settled in and staying for their meals at the earliest possible date in September.
41. In the case of transitioning to Year 1 of primary school, schools should consider that the vast majority, if not all, pupils will have received at least one year of pre-school education. Staggering is therefore discouraged and should be kept to a minimum.
42. Should the school choose to use a staggered start process, **the majority of children should be settled in within the first two weeks of September**. All pupils should be staying for meals within four weeks of their start date. It is particularly important that pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSMs) are settled in and staying for their meals at the earliest possible date in September. Consideration should be given to the provision of a FSM, for example a packed lunch, if pupils are not able to stay in school for their meal.
43. Some post primary schools have a practice of providing a single transition day when they are open to Year 8 pupils to provide familiarity with the school environment in a less busy context. The benefits of such practice are recognised but it is advised this should be limited to a single day and may for example take place on the same day as sixth form induction. Schools should avoid the practice of multiple induction days for different year groups which are disruptive to the continuity of teaching and learning and lead to an unnecessarily prolonged and staggered beginning to the school year.

11. Study leave

44. Pupils' time is most effectively spent in the classroom receiving high quality face to face teaching and learning from their teachers. Therefore, as set out in [Circular 2024/13](#), study leave should be kept to a minimum and **only ever used in preparation for external public examinations**. Pupils taking internal exams should **not** be placed on study leave or remote learning for exam preparation and arrangements should be in place for supervised study in school during the internal examination period.
45. In order to minimise disruption for parents/carers a minimum of one week's notice should be given for external examination study leave.
46. The Department's Tackling Educational Disadvantage team monitor SIMS data on a monthly basis and schools will be asked to provide an explanation for any use of the Study Leave code where it is not deemed appropriate.

Year 11 Pupils

47. Schools should make every effort to maximise teaching time for pupils in Year 11 and extended study leave should be avoided wherever possible. Pupils taking examination modules should attend school as normal except for the days of public examinations and remain in school until the end of the school year.

Year 12 Pupils

48. Schools should make every effort to maximise teaching time for pupils in Year 12 and extended study leave should be avoided wherever possible.

Year 13 Pupils

49. All Year 13 pupils should return to a full timetable in June following the completion of AS examinations. In no circumstances should pupils finish Year 13 after completion of their AS examinations as this is likely to result in several weeks of missed teaching and learning.

12. Applying a flexible timetable in exceptional circumstances

50. Schools have on occasion introduced temporary flexible timetables for individual pupils for various reasons such as emotional, behavioural or welfare reasons or phased return after a long illness. Such occasions should be extremely rare and only be utilised for short periods of time with a view to full reinstatement of a normal timetable as quickly as possible.

51. It is vital that the use of flexible timetables is fully justified and schools should consider potential safeguarding risks associated with such practice. In instances where pupils may not be able to complete a full curriculum, schools should consider alternatives to sending pupils home without completing the full school day being cognisant of the legal requirement to a minimum of 4.5 hours of instruction for all pupils over age eight.
52. Advice on how to record a flexible timetable on SIMS is available from the most recent Departmental circular covering [Attendance Guidance and Absence Recording](#).

13. Role of Boards of Governors

53. The education system relies on Boards of Governors to verify at the end of the year that all of the pupils in their school have been taught for the requisite full days. It is the responsibility of each Board of Governors to provide the necessary assurance statements, as requested by EA.
54. The principal of each school must provide the EA with a statement on the school annual holiday return form in respect of the ensuing year. The form must be signed by the Principal and countersigned by the Chairperson or other authorised person representing the Board of Governors of the school.