



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Recording and reporting COVID-19 post primary pupil related absences

The Department of Education

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this information note is to outline the arrangements for reporting absenteeism of students in the context of the COVID-19 related absences for schools.

2.1 Current requirements for reporting absenteeism of students

The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 requires the reporting of student absenteeism in certain circumstances to Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), in particular student absences of 20 days or more during the school year.

Notwithstanding the current COVID-19 related environment that schools are now operating in, the statutory requirements for reporting student absenteeism will continue as normal. In this respect the Educational Welfare Act requires the principal of a recognised school to maintain records of the attendance or non-attendance on each school day of each student registered at that school.

It is important that there is early intervention by TESS where necessary to support those students at risk of not returning to school.

2.2 Recording COVID-19 related absences

COVID-19 related absences arising from students who have been requested to self-isolate by a medical professional, or restrict their movements, or for students who feel unwell with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 must be recorded in accordance with the school's procedures for the notification and recording of absences. These COVID-19 related absences should be noted by the school as explained absences.

In relation to explained absences and in line with the procedures for referrals from schools to the EWS, schools are advised to use their discretion in determining whether a student's explained absence warrants a referral to EWS. A student's absence may be satisfactorily explained by certified illness, bereavement or other valid reasons such as those related to COVID-19.

2.3 Recording COVID-19 absences for students with underlying medical conditions engaging in adapted education provision

Students who are medically certified as being at very high risk to COVID-19 and who are engaging with learning through adapted education provision should be marked as present in school attendance records. If students disengage from adapted education provision for medical or other reasons they should be marked absent for the period of disengagement. Please see section 2.5 in relation to valid enrolments.

The Department has published guidance for schools in relation to making adapted education provision for students who are extremely vulnerable to COVID-19. That guidance can be found here: <https://assets.gov.ie/86732/17f3cc49-72ad-4986-98fc-51037d93369e.pdf>

2.4 Recording absences for students who do not have underlying medical conditions but who have not returned to school due to Covid-19.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre have advised that Children with immediate family members, including parents, in both the 'high risk' and 'very high risk' categories can return to school and it is important for the child's overall well-being. This is consistent with public health advice internationally in relation to at-risk family members. Therefore students who themselves do not have underlying medical conditions are required to attend school and any absences of these students should be recorded in the normal way.

The Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) will engage with these students and families to promote and support school attendance as outlined in Section 2.5 below.

2.5 Role of Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) in supporting schools and parents

TESS is comprised of three interlinked strands, The Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL), The School Completion Programme (SCP) and The Educational Welfare Service (EWS), which work in collaboration with schools, families and other relevant services to promote and support school attendance, participation and retention.

As schools reopened, TESS staff have engaged with families to provide advice and assistance for students as they return to school recognising the challenging context for many children and young people.

In order to comprehensively identify all students who do not return, TESS has asked all schools to complete a once off 'COVID-19' school return when each school had completed a minimum of 20 school days. This return will identify those students who have not returned to school despite the best efforts of the school team and initial supports offered by TESS.

This return was due to be submitted to TESS by Friday October 16th. This return was completed on the TESS school return portal at portal.tusla.ie and step by step guidance on completing the return was provided on the portal. Further assistance was available by emailing school.return@tusla.ie

From October 2020, the three TESS strands have organised their capacity to engage with all those students identified by schools as not returning. In order to reach out to all schools nationwide TESS adopted the following approach:

- HSCL staff focused on their respective DEIS schools
- SCP staff focused on the DEIS and non-DEIS schools in their SCP cluster.
- EWS staff focused on all other DEIS and non-DEIS schools that do not have either HSCL or SCP supports. EWS staff were supported by the temporary reassignment of staff from the wider TUSLA organisation to TESS where necessary.

In responding to referrals made while we are impacted by Covid-19 - TESS will take into account the requirement for students who feel unwell with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 or who have been informed to self-isolate or restrict their movements and not to attend school. The same will apply for students who may be absent from school due to other genuine illnesses unrelated to COVID-19

For further queries on reporting school absenteeism you should contact your local regional TESS office. Details of the contact numbers as well as further information for schools can be accessed at www.tusla.ie/tess/information-for-schools/

School enrolments returns for 30 September 2020

Circular 38/2014, (Sec 12, *Accuracy of Returns*) sets out *'that the total number of recognised students submitted in the October Return will be used to calculate staffing and grant allocations to your school. It is therefore very important to ensure, in particular, that the total number of recognised students is accurate'*. The purpose of this provision is to ensure only valid enrolments are returned to the Department so that staffing and financial resources can be allocated in a fair and equitable basis across all schools of equal size regardless of location.

The Department appreciates and is aware that in some cases parents may have chosen to delay their children returning to school due to concerns in relation to COVID-19. The Department recognises that in instances where this arises, schools may have concerns regarding their valid enrolments and consequential impact on funding and staffing for the 2021/2022 school year.

The following should be noted by schools in the context of COVID-19 and school enrolment returns to the Department on the 30th September 2020:

Students who are currently enrolled in the school for the school year 2020/21.

Students who have not returned to the school for the 2020/2021 school year

In instances where students continue to be enrolled in the school, but due to parental concerns in relation to COVID-19 have delayed returning to school (see Section 2.4 above), or where students have not returned to school from overseas, the following exceptional circumstances will apply in relation to valid enrolments for the 2020/21 school year:

- Schools should seek written confirmation from parents/guardians that the student continues to be enrolled in the school and that it is their intention for their child to attend school at some time during the 2020/21 school year
- This written parental/guardian confirmation should be held on file by the school and should be made available to the Department's Inspectorate on request. In such circumstances the student is considered to be enrolled and continues to have a place in school

- In instances where parents have indicated that their child will not be returning from overseas to attend school in this school year, they cannot be considered a valid enrolment.
- There is no change to the current arrangements for students who are enrolled in the school on a full-time basis and following a full-time programme of at least one year's duration, but who are temporarily absent on 30th of the school year due to a short term placement on an exchange programme abroad. These students are to be included in a school's October Returns.
- Students who are from outside of Republic of Ireland and on short term placement and in attendance on 30th September are not recognised students.

Where schools have received written confirmation from parents/guardians as set out above, schools should continue to enroll these students on PPOD as normal. For those schools that have already submitted their census returns they should contact the PPOD to have these students added to their enrolments and to have their census returns amended accordingly.

Students who are engaging with learning through adapted education provision

Students who have been certified as very high risk to COVID-19 and are engaging with learning through adapted education provision are considered as a valid enrolment.

Importance of accurate enrolment returns to the Department

Schools are reminded about the importance of ensuring the accuracy of enrolment returns to the Department. They have a responsibility to immediately notify the Department of any error or irregularity in their enrolment returns. It is important to note that it is the Department's policy for cases that involve any deliberate overstatement of enrolments is to refer them to *Án Garda Síochána*.