

07 January, 2021 - Minister for Education Norma Foley TD has confirmed that all schools will regrettably remain closed to students from Monday 11 January

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The Government decision, taken on 6 January, on foot of public health advice to reduce mobility in the community, was to close schools for the vast majority of students for a period of three weeks.

As of Monday 11 January students, including children with special needs, will resort to a programme of remote learning in line with the rest of the Government restrictions.

There has been continuous engagement with education partners on this matter since Monday, building on weekly engagement between partners and public health throughout the school year.

Today Department of Education officials met with education partners including trade unions, and school management bodies to discuss the safe provision of in-person learning to pupils in special classes and special schools and to Leaving Certificate students, and remote learning to other students from Monday 11 January.

This meeting was attended on behalf of Public Health by senior public health specialists.

In a meeting lasting over two hours Public Health provided their reassurance that it is safe for both students and staff to operate schools at this time utilising the preventative measures that are in place.

During that meeting Public Health reiterated their belief that schools are safe environments.

Closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family and societal level.

For children, it impacts on wellbeing, learning, on social and emotional development.

School closure has significant impacts on children with special educational needs. School closure also heightens student anxiety, particularly for the Leaving Certificate cohort, in relation to state examinations.

In this context the Government decided to prioritise in-person teaching and learning for two specific cohorts; pupils/students attending special schools and classes and final year Leaving Certificate students. This decision was supported by the public health advice available to Government.

NPHET and Public Health continue to hold the clear view that schools are safe places, as outlined in the letter to Government from the CMO, published today.

"It is with regret that I announce that, despite the confirmation by Public Health that schools remain safe, that children in special schools and special classes and Leaving Certificate students will not be extended in-person learning," said Minister Foley.

"My Department has engaged with the unions and public health officials with a view to maintaining on site learning for this vulnerable group of students.

"It remains my strong belief that this period of time is crucial for the mental wellbeing of all children with special needs.

"I also felt it was the right thing to extend in-class teaching to our Leaving Certificate students who are approaching a crucial time in their exam year.

"Unfortunately I am left with no alternative but to pause the limited reopening on Monday to allow further engagement with all education stakeholders."