

**Subject:**

**Circular Number: 2020/06**

**Curriculum Planning 2020/21**

**Date of Issue:**

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**Target Audience:**

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all nursery, primary, post-primary and special grant-aided schools
- Education Authority (EA)
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)
- Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC)
- Proprietors of Independent Schools
- Governing Bodies Association of Voluntary Grammar Schools in NI (GBANI)
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)
- General Teaching Council for NI (GTCNI)
- Teachers' Unions
- EOTAS Centres
- Middletown Centre for Autism
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS)

**Summary of Contents:**

This circular provides advice and guidance to schools on curriculum planning for the 2020/21 academic year

**Enquiries:**

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**Governor Awareness:**

Essential

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Guidance for schools

**Expiry Date:**

None

This circular provides advice and guidance to schools on curriculum planning for the 2020/21 academic year

**DE Website:**

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## **Curriculum Planning 2020/21**

### **Introduction**

1. This circular aims to provide guidance and support for schools as they design their curriculum for 2020/21. It should be read in conjunction with Departmental Circular 2020/05 which was issued earlier this month and sets out high-level principles that schools may wish to consider when further developing their remote learning programmes and as they plan for a blended approach to learning. In addition, the Department has separately published New School Day Guidance around the practical and logistical arrangements for the reopening of schools.
2. This circular will be supplemented with more detailed resources, guidance materials and case studies produced by the Department's Continuity of Learning Project.<sup>1</sup> These guidance materials can be accessed at <https://www.eani.org.uk/supporting-learning> and via the C2K network.
3. The Department is very conscious that schools had extremely limited time to prepare for the delivery of remote learning prior to school closures and there are challenges in the preparation for the adoption of a blended approach for the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year or as may be required in the future. This is a unique and unprecedented time for education. However, due to the professionalism and expertise of school leaders and staff, schools in Northern Ireland have adapted quickly. This circular is intended to provide advice and assistance in planning for the 2020/21 academic year. The situation in regard to the COVID-19 is moving quite rapidly. Further guidance will, therefore, be provided and this circular updated as the context changes.

### **The Northern Ireland Curriculum**

4. The Northern Ireland curriculum is designed to help our children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century. The Department suggests that the starting point for all schools in preparing for 2020/1 should be how best in these unique circumstances to continue to deliver the spirit of the statutory Northern Ireland curriculum in each Area of Learning to meet the needs of children and young people.

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<sup>1</sup> This project involves the Department, CCEA, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), the Education Authority (EA), CCMS and other sectoral support organisations working collaboratively.

5. Schools will wish to consider how they tailor and adapt delivery of the curriculum to support recovery as pupils return to the school environment (see section on **Curriculum Planning**).
6. The flexibility of the curriculum aims to empower schools in normal circumstances to make the decisions needed to provide a curriculum that is adaptable and responsive to the needs of individual learners. The curriculum is designed to have limited prescription giving schools as much flexibility as possible in what they choose to teach, for how long and how often and to use approaches that best suit their pupils.
7. Schools, therefore, continue to have the freedom within the minimum entitlement of the statutory curriculum to develop content they believe is best for the pupils within their school community at this particular time. School leaders and teachers can use their knowledge and professional expertise to adapt their usual plans and practice to suit their own unique circumstances providing the content they consider is best for their pupils, informed by their inherent understanding of the children in their school community.
8. The Department is confident that various approaches to learning which have been suggested by educational experts and stakeholder groups including the trade unions can sit comfortably within the broad framework of the statutory curriculum. This in turn can provide assurance to teachers that their professional judgement is secure in the choices they make for their pupils and that different contexts for learning are not replacing the curriculum but are realising its vision, aims and objectives in new, appropriate ways.

### **What is blended learning?**

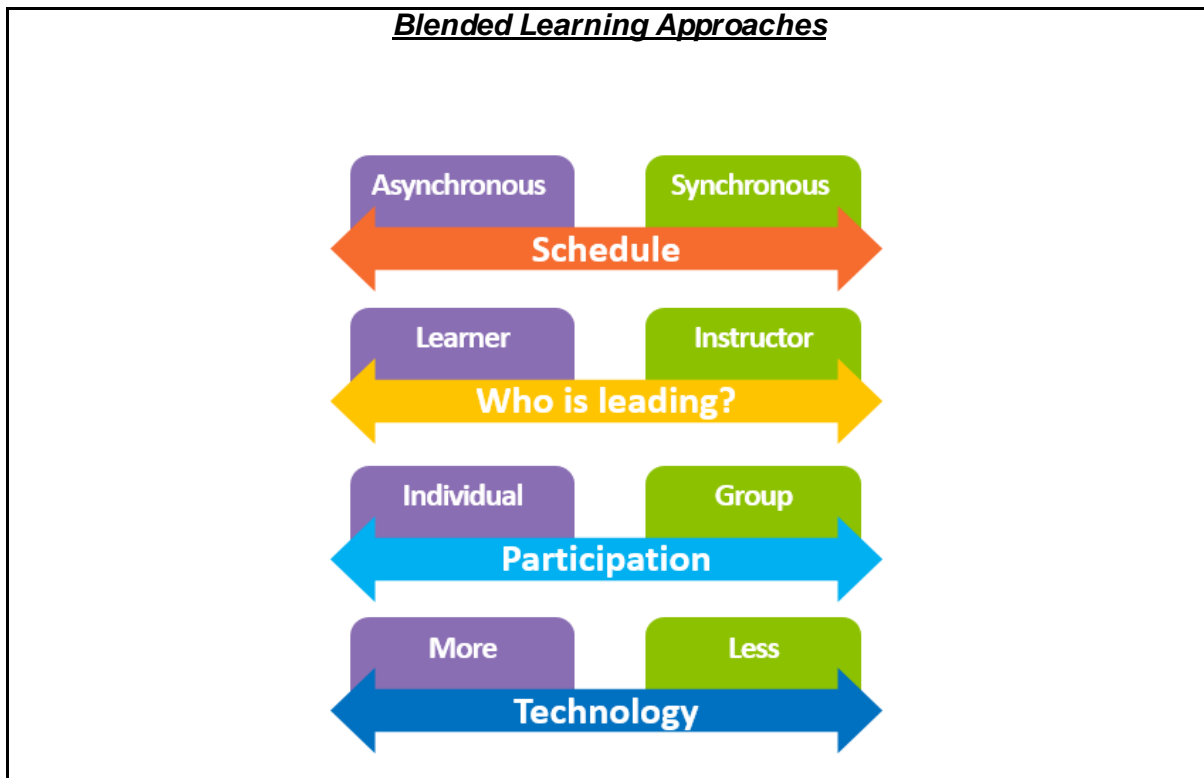
9. Initially in 2020/21, it is likely, dependent on medical and scientific advice, that there will need to be some degree of a blended approach to learning, with some children returning to in-school learning on a part-time basis.
10. The term blended learning will currently mean slightly different things to different school leaders, educators, teaching unions, parents and pupils. It is suggested that in the Northern Ireland context for 2020/21 blended learning is broadly defined as:

***An approach to education whereby schools will combine classroom based teaching and learning methods within school, with a range of remote learning in order to deliver the Northern Ireland curriculum.***

11. Learning outside of the classroom is something that pupils have always been encouraged to do. Many schools across Northern Ireland have regularly utilised blended learning to enhance delivery of the curriculum, particularly in post primary schools where many older learners are increasingly developing independent study skills. The key difference in 2020/21 is that blended learning will for some pupils initially be central and integral to curricular delivery. Core delivery of the Northern Ireland curriculum will be both synchronous within the classroom and asynchronous with teaching and learning occurring at different points in time.<sup>2</sup>
12. There are many ways to blend face-to-face classroom time and out of class learning. There is no prescribed, one size fits all approach. The Department appreciates that the nature of provision will vary across schools who need the flexibility to plan and provide a blended learning approach that is suitable for their particular circumstances. This includes considering the age and learning needs of pupils, the content of particular subjects or Areas of Learning and the expertise and confidence of the individual teacher. The diagram below shows how a variety of approaches can be mixed and matched along a continuum.
13. As noted above, the situation in regard to the COVID-19 outbreak is changing rapidly. It is anticipated that the relative balance between in class and out of class learning will vary between schools and individual year groups and change as the 2020/21 academic year progresses, with school attendance, dependent on medical and scientific advice, returning to pre-COVID-19 patterns.

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<sup>2</sup> Asynchronous approaches occur independently at different points in time, based on the child or young person's request or home circumstances; whereas synchronous approaches occur with a number of other children or young people at the same time.



## **Curriculum Planning 2020/21**

### Overview

14. In curriculum planning for 2020/21, schools will note that Department and ETI have recognised the need for a flexible approach to school development planning in the coming academic year. Schools may wish to prepare a transitional plan for 2020/21, which particularly addresses the specific challenges and whole-school priorities that will be faced in the next academic year as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak (see <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Guidance%20on%20School%20Development%20Planning%20for%20202021.pdf> )
  
15. There are no hard and fast solutions to what works. Schools' plans in 2020/21 will be very much working documents that will evolve and adapt in light of wider societal and public health changes and lessons learned at school and system level about blended learning.
  
16. Some parents and pupils will be extremely anxious about the possibility of missed curriculum content and knowledge during the period of school closures, particularly those pupils taking courses leading to public examinations. There may also be a natural

tendency after a period of extended closure for schools to try to ensure missed knowledge content is caught up quickly.

17. The Department would emphasise, however, the key importance after many months away from the school environment of ensuring children have good emotional health and wellbeing, are engaged and motivated to learn and have the tools and skills they require for learning. Schools will know that stress and anxiety have a significant impact on the brain's ability to process, learn and retain information.
18. Whilst it is important not to underestimate the task facing schools, evidence indicates that missed knowledge content is not likely to be a long-term problem for pupils, as long as they are given supportive tools to facilitate learning. Language is important and frequent references to "missed work" or "lost time" or "catch up" will potentially increase pupil anxiety.
19. The key message across the system is that the aim for 2020/21 is to support pupils to be motivated to learn and towards becoming skilled and independent learners through a curriculum that gives equal emphasis to knowledge, understanding and skills rather than catching up missed knowledge content.
20. Schools will know that it is important to understand where pupils are in regard to their learning after the period of remote education. Normal formative assessment approaches within the classroom setting will be the most useful way of identifying individual pupil learning needs. That approach will retain an emphasis on making pupils feel confident and secure in what they already know while supporting engagement with learning.
21. Initially, in primary and special schools in particular, it is likely that activities will often focus on getting pupils used to the routines and safe behaviours, interacting with others within the rules and building the ability to engage with activities and sustain concentration. Engaging activities with opportunities for collaboration and creativity will be key. Play and social interaction within the protective bubble of the class are centrally important for younger children. All of this can be facilitated within the flexibility of the Northern Ireland curriculum.
22. As the 2020/21 academic year commences, schools will wish to provide opportunities to:

- allow pupils to share their experience of school closure and express their feelings, ideas, concerns and positive experiences (see section on **Recovery Conversations** below);
- rebuild relationships and re-establish friendships.
- reassure pupils that any loss of learning is understood by the teachers;
- understand how to engage with learning and how to learn; and
- build children's confidence as learners;

23. The Department recognises that there are significantly greater challenges where pupils are taking courses leading to public examinations. We have, therefore, commissioned CCEA as a matter of urgency to provide advice on a range of options for examinations in the 2020/21 academic year. The Department has asked CCEA to give consideration to:

- the potential impact of the loss of face-to-face teaching time and the consequential need to make allowances relating to this;
- the loss of momentum in preparing for modules this year (since COVID-19 related measures were imposed);
- the need for pupils to revise modules from one year while progressing modules for the next year; and
- potential mental health and well-being issues.

Further guidance specific to curricular areas at Key Stage 4 and Post-16 will, therefore, issue as soon as possible.

### Key Considerations

24. In planning for 2020/21, schools will be considering how best to deliver the curriculum in the entirely new situation created by the COVID-19 outbreak. Some of the key considerations schools will wish to reflect on are discussed below. Whilst suggestions have been provided, it is again emphasised schools have the flexibility and authority to make decisions to best suit the needs of their pupils. The context is also changing and evolving.

**Key Consideration 1: How best to teach the curriculum if there is less time for in-school learning?**

- It may be helpful to identify for each year group the key or core concepts and skills that are addressed in each Area of Learning at primary and each subject at post-primary. Some schools may choose to re-plan around these key concepts in each Area of Learning or subject so that pupils are secure in the ideas that underpin them.
- Year groups or Departments may wish to identify non-negotiable knowledge and skills pupils need to progress to the next stage in their education and ensure these are prioritised for in-class teaching.
- Middle leaders might identify topics and concepts that pupils typically find more challenging and ensure these are prioritised for in-school learning.
- Schools might consider the order of teaching in some subjects or Areas of Learning, perhaps delaying some topics and content until later in the school year when pupils are likely be spending more time in school. Flexibility to alter the sequence will of course depend on the nature of the subject. There may be less flexibility around the order of modules at examination level to ensure as much commonality of approach as possible in the upcoming year.
- Flipped learning is a pedagogical approach where pupils first explore new course content before class by viewing a pre-recorded lecture, video or digital module, or completing a reading or preparatory assignment. In-class time can then be organised around pupil engagement, inquiry, and assessment. Blended learning provides opportunities in some Areas of Learning and subjects to embed flipped learning as a method of curricular delivery (where age and developmentally appropriate). It typically entails the use of active learning strategies, including case studies, investigating problems or structured discussion.
- Feedback from parental surveys has emphasised how useful parents have found short videos explaining key concepts with which they are unfamiliar. This has built their confidence in reinforcing teaching approaches used by the teachers.

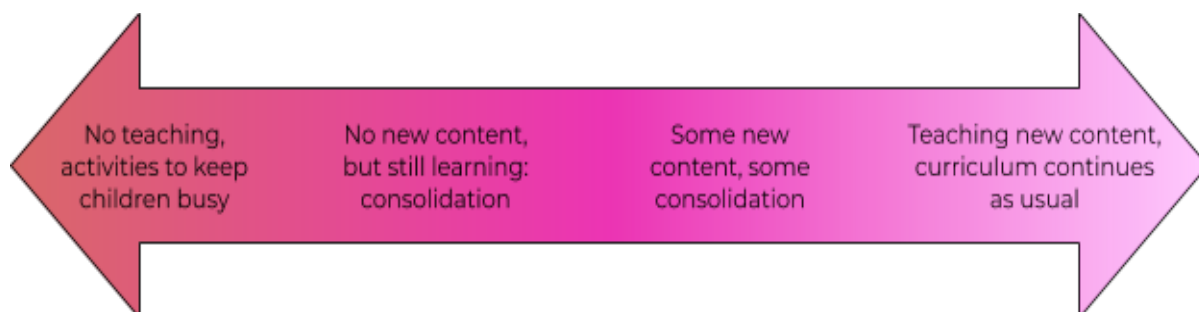
### **Key Consideration 2: What to teach in-school and what to teach remotely?**

- Schools will wish to reflect on where they are currently with remote learning and how they want to move forward as they develop their approach to blended learning. There



are a variety of stages in schools' approaches to remote learning along a continuum. Most schools will not stay fixed at one point rather they will be moving along the continuum and adapting as time goes on, based on what works for their school community.

### *Continuum of Remote Learning*



- School leaders will develop an appropriate approach as to what to teach remotely for their school community based on their approach to a number of key questions.
  - ✓ *What level of access do our pupils currently have to devices and connectivity?*
  - ✓ *How much can we ask of our staff at this time?*
  - ✓ *How much can we ask of our parents and families?*
  - ✓ *What level of home support can be provided for learning?*
  - ✓ *Do we want to consolidate existing knowledge and on site learning, or teach new content (the answer to this may vary according to Year Group and subject area)?*
  - ✓ *If new content, what type?*
- As much as possible schools will wish to develop a 'mirrored' curriculum through designing in-class and remote learning in tandem so learning at school aligns with out of class learning and pupils can move as seamlessly as possible between the two.
- Schools may also wish to reflect on how their school vision might be adapted or changed to develop an effective vision for blended learning. It is envisaged that greater use of online learning will continue post-pandemic, with the integration of Information Technology in education being further accelerated by recent events. Ideally, the aim would be to develop a vision for blended learning that can be sustained and remain useful as the school returns to normal patterns of attendance.

- Clearly, there is limited time before the 2020/21 academic term will commence. However, time spent thinking about and developing a clear whole-school approach to what blended learning will look like is important as it will:
  - ✓ provide direction and helps the school prepare for the future
  - ✓ inform planning and help set priorities;
  - ✓ prioritise, align and helps focus the work of individuals across the school;
  - ✓ provide purpose; and
  - ✓ characterise the school's approach its school community, particularly its parents.
  
- The ways in which schools and school leaders develop a vision for blended learning will differ but usually it will be based on the answers to some key questions such as those set out below.
  - ✓ What will blended learning look like in our school?
  - ✓ What do we need to do differently to achieve this?
  - ✓ Can we learn from how others are developing their approach?
  - ✓ How will we communicate the vision to parents and the wider school community?
  - ✓ How will we deliver drive forward the vision?

**Key Consideration 3: How to maintain curriculum breadth and other enrichment activities if there is less in-school time?**

- Some schools have found in recent months that running weekly competitions or challenges for the whole school or particular year groups, for example fitness, writing, art exhibitions or maths investigations can provide opportunities for breadth and enrichment. This could continue in the blended learning environment.
  
- Schools may wish to think about any clubs or optional activities that could be provided or meet remotely for example coding or language clubs or skills development in sports. Schools might also think about new clubs and activities that are well suited to being delivered or meeting remotely for example online games clubs, book or film clubs. This can help maintain a balance of academic and extra-curricular learning.

**Key Consideration 4: What contact time should be provided by subject at post-primary?**

- Post-primary schools will wish to ensure pupils continue to be taught by and have regular access to subject specialists across the Areas of Learning.
- The flexibility of the curriculum allows schools to determine how much in-class contact time is provided for each subject. Some schools may decide to prioritise certain subjects for contact time if there is reduced time on site particularly during the first few weeks of term. Others may prefer to continue to deliver in-class learning with the relative balance of the curriculum which they would normally provide. It is a matter for schools to determine what works best for their pupils in these unique circumstances. This may also change as the amount of in-class provision increases.
- Decisions about the contact time required for each subject may be partly based on which subjects appear to have more opportunities for work to be done remotely with, for example, practical subjects requiring more on-site contact time with teachers.

### **The importance of Skills for Learning**

25. The central importance of the development of the whole curriculum thinking skills and personal capabilities at the heart of the Northern Ireland curriculum has been underlined by recent events. Coping with the high level of uncertainty and change presented by COVID-19 requires adaptability and psychological resilience. This has underlined the key importance of these skills and personal capabilities in the rapidly changing environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

26. Further, blended learning does provide particular opportunities to focus on pupil independence as learners and on enhancing all of these skills. Skills like self-management, thinking, problem solving, decision making and management of information can be particularly nurtured in a blended model.

#### **Whole Curriculum Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities**

- ✓ Managing Information,
- ✓ Thinking, Problem Solving, Decision Making
- ✓ Being Creative
- ✓ Working with Others and
- ✓ Self-Management

27. Schools will wish, therefore, to explicitly consider and reflect on how they are developing these skills in each Area of Learning as they design their blended learning curriculum for 2020/21.
28. CCEA has developed a number of resources to support schools in embedding thinking skills and capabilities into learning, teaching and assessment (<https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/developing-and-embedding-thinking-skills-and-personal-capabilities>).
29. School leaders and staff know that meta-learning – learning how to learn and developing self-knowledge about strategies and behaviours for learning – is a key element of the curriculum. Encouraging pupils to reflect on how they learn and equipping them with a 'growth mindset' are particularly important skills at this time when in-class learning time has been reduced.
30. Consequently, as pupils return to school after an extended period of absence, schools may wish to make the skills for learning in a school environment explicit to pupils to support them to build or rebuild their confidence and resilience as learners.
31. The 'lockdown' period will have allowed some pupils to find out more about their preferred styles and their motivation to learn in different curriculum areas and in different ways. This provides particular opportunities for young people to reflect on how they were approaching learning and preparation for examinations in the past and will allow them to draw individual learning points in relation how they start a new school year and set personal targets for themselves both academically and personally.

### **Re-Engaging with Learning**

32. While many pupils will have coped well with engaging with remote learning activities, some pupils may return to school disengaged and require support to re-engage and move on with learning. As always, schools will recognize the need to identify and support those pupils who are most likely to experience difficulties in engaging with learning;
33. Given this situation, in considering curriculum delivery, schools will wish to think about how they can design motivational learning activities to specifically increase behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. Teachers will do much of this instinctively but at

the present time it is important to reflect on, discuss and plan to develop engagement explicitly. In doing this, it may be useful to consider the key principles below.

- i. Purposeful learning. To increase pupil engagement it is important to show why the learning matters and explicitly help pupils to understand how what they are learning in school relates to their lives and how it matters to them in school and beyond. Connecting with pupils' previous knowledge and experiences may help teachers to design a learning task that is personally meaningful and make connections between new information and previous knowledge.
- ii. Foster a sense of competence. Research has found that effectively performing an activity can positively impact on subsequent engagement. When children feel competent, they have a sense of themselves as being capable to tackle the tasks and challenges they encounter. Pupils' sense of competence in learning can be enhanced by providing learning opportunities which are only slightly beyond their current level of proficiency and allowing them to demonstrate understanding throughout.
- iii. Collaborative learning: engagement may be strengthened due to experiencing a sense of connection to others. To make group work more productive, strategies can be implemented to ensure that students know how to communicate and behave in that setting. Teacher modelling is one effective method and fostering individual accountability by assigning different roles, and evaluating both the pupil and the group performance also support collaborative learning.
- iv. Providing supported autonomy; pupils are given a sense of control rather than promoting compliance. Allowing pupils to have some choice and control can help instill ownership and responsibility for their own learning. This can be implemented by involving pupils in setting learning objectives; welcoming pupils' opinions into the flow of the activity; facilitating a self-directed learning process and giving pupils time to understand and absorb the task by themselves.
- v. Promote mastery orientations. pupils' perspective of learning activities also determines their level of engagement. When pupils pursue a task because they want to learn and understand (i.e. mastery orientations), rather than for example to obtain a good grade, please their parents, or outperform peers (i.e. performance orientations), their engagement is more likely to be full and thorough.

## **Recovery Conversations**

34. Schools will wish to consider the way they address the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in the school environment. Every child and young person will have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic uniquely. It is clearly important to help pupils share and reflect on their experiences, to help them consolidate their thinking and be ready to move forward.
35. Schools will wish to think about how as an organisation they will acknowledge the collective experience of recent events. Assemblies may have to happen in small groups or perhaps with all watching on screen in their classrooms, but it is a possible way to give a positive starting message, and encourage a sense of belonging to the school community.
36. Many children and young people will want to talk about what has happened and engage in conversations about their experiences in classes and small groups. While we all acknowledge the importance of post-traumatic stress, schools know it will be important to balance this with a focus on post traumatic growth and looking to the future. Equally, young people's experiences will not be black and white. There are many accounts of pupils looking out for and helping others or developing new skills and interests during lockdown.
37. Schools may wish to deliberately scaffold conversations to identify and acknowledge both negatives and positives in recent experiences. Schools may, for example, wish to open a dialogue where pupils and staff (separately or together) start to consider what has been good (a gain/improvement) or bad (a loss/concern) about the change to educational arrangements. Conversations may also for example consider how recent experiences stand in relation to the school's core values.
38. By investing time in and for the whole school community at the start of staff and pupils' return, schools can acknowledge what has happened and can importantly draw out the positively of being back together as a school community.
39. .As the term continues schools will wish to provide:
- continued opportunities for children to talk about their experiences of the past number of months;

- opportunities for one-to-one conversations with trusted adults where this may be supportive;
- some refocussed lessons on relevant topics, for example, mental wellbeing or staying safe;
- pastoral activity, such as positive opportunities to renew and develop friendships and peer groups; and
- a variety of enriching creative and developmental activities.

40. Schools will also wish to think carefully about the content of curriculum topics. Children will want space to talk about their COVID-19 related experiences and ideas but they also will need time to think about other things and get away from the dominance of the COVID-19 outbreak. They will welcome continuing to learn, developing their knowledge, understanding and skills across the curriculum. Schools will use their professional judgement to find the right balance for their children and young people.

#### **Support for School Leaders and Staff**

41. These are challenging times and the Department does not underestimate the issues facing school leaders, teachers and all staff in school communities. The EA has developed and delivered an initial menu of Teacher Professional Learning opportunities for the period May-June 2020. Going forward, the Department has asked EA to develop a Plan for Teacher Professional Learning for 2020/21 which will prioritise supporting teachers to utilise a range of online tools to support delivery of the curriculum.

42. Many of the pastoral considerations outlined above are just as true for all of the adults in school as they are for the children and it will be important for school communities to support each other in rebuilding confidence in knowing what is best for the children in their care. As above school communities should reflect together, celebrating the wide range of skills and versatility teachers and other staff bring to their role but which they themselves take for granted. Society has recognised the uniqueness of those skills across the period of the pandemic and will continue to rely on and appreciate that expertise as we move to a new normal.

