

An tAonad Pholasáí,
Curacclaim agus Measúnachta,
An Roinn Oideachais agus
Scileanna,
Sráid Mhaoilbhríde
Baile Atha Cliath 1
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Circular 0013/2016

**TO
BOARDS OF MANAGEMENT AND PRINCIPALS OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS
AND SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND TO THE CHIEF EXECUTIVES OF
EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARDS**

Promotion of Healthy Lifestyles in Primary Schools

1. Context for guidance on healthy lifestyles

This circular focuses on the importance of physical activity and healthy eating. It is acknowledged that mental and psychological well-being are a key part of healthy lifestyles. Schools support these through their work on anti-bullying and the SPHE curriculum.

Schools and the wider education sector have a vital role to play in contributing to the 'Healthy Ireland' agenda that is being led by the Department of Health and is supported by the Department of Education and Skills and other Government Departments. Schools are contributing to the overall physical, mental health and well-being of our young people. But there are many challenges for our young people if they are to adopt a healthy lifestyle and enjoy positive health and wellbeing to their full potential. We can, in collaboration with parents and families, all do more to address these challenges. This circular aims to support and strengthen primary schools' efforts in this regard.

It is important for the present and future health of our population that pupils are equipped with the key skills and knowledge which will enable them more confidently to make healthier life choices. It is equally important that schools' efforts in this area are complemented and reinforced by practices in pupils' homes and in the wider community. The Healthy Ireland agenda is committed to supporting everyone's efforts to improve their health and wellbeing. In addition, evidence shows that healthy lifestyle behaviours can improve academic performance, educational behaviour and pupils'

cognitive skills. Such health benefits for young people are inextricably linked with their overall development.

This circular is intended to highlight to Boards of Management and Principals of primary schools and special schools and CEs of ETBs their responsibilities in this area, to acknowledge their significant efforts to date and to recommend measures that can be improved or adopted to promote healthy lifestyles amongst their pupils.

The results of the 2012 ‘Lifeskills’ survey, which were published by the Department of Education and Skills in February 2014¹, highlighted many areas where primary schools are particularly proactive in relation to the Healthy Ireland agenda. This is very welcome but there is still scope for further improvements in the future. Some 68% of primary schools responded to the 2012 survey and the high response rate is appreciated.

The results of the 2015 Lifeskills survey are currently being analysed by the Department of Education and Skills and will be published early in 2016. This will provide an indication of schools’ performance in these areas since 2009 and 2012.

2. Health Promoting Schools initiative

Only 40% of primary schools are currently participating in, or are in the process of becoming involved in, the ‘Health Promoting Schools’ (HPS) initiative which is led by the HSE and the Department of Health, with the support of the Department of Education and Skills. ‘Health’ in this context includes physical wellbeing but also focuses on pupils’ emotional and psychological wellbeing.

The aims of the HPS initiative are to:

- Foster the healthy development of the whole school community.
- Provide a framework for developing health promotion initiatives in a way that supports and enhances the implementation of the curriculum.
- Support the planning, implementation and evaluation of health-related activities under school self-evaluation, and school development planning processes.
- Enhance the links between schools and their communities.

Boards of Management and Principals are strongly encouraged to participate in the HPS initiative. As part of the HPS initiative, HSE Health Promotion Officers and the dedicated team of the Wellbeing pillar of the Professional Development Support Service for Teachers (PDST) collaborate on a regional basis to ensure that schools are supported in meeting the health needs of their pupils. Information for schools, including a Framework document *Schools for Health in Ireland Framework - Primary* and a Co-Ordinator’s Handbook, as well as local support contact details, are available at www.healthpromotion.ie/health/schools.

¹ The ‘Lifeskills’ report is available at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Results-of-the-Department-of-Education-and-Skills-Lifeskills-Survey-2012.pdf>

Schools are encouraged to use the HPS as a medium to engage their pupils and/or their student council (where they are in place) in decision making that contributes to the promotion of healthy lifestyles among all pupils and by extension, into their communities. Pupils should be supported, where possible, to play active roles in designing, implementing and monitoring initiatives and programmes. Such involvement is likely to result in much greater levels of engagement and more positive outcomes for the health and wellbeing of your school community.

The 2012 Lifeskills survey shows that only 14% of primary schools have student councils. While this is an improvement on the 8% figure from the 2009 survey, the number is still very low. Schools are encouraged to establish student councils. Student councils give pupils an opportunity to experience democracy in action and provide a formal communication line to the school principal and the board of management. They allow the young people a formal platform where their views can be listened to and acted upon where possible. It is probably their first opportunity to experience the democratic process in action.

3. Healthy Eating Policy

3.1 Lifeskills

The Lifeskills survey shows that primary schools have been very active in this area. The relevant findings from the 2012 'Lifeskills' survey indicate that among respondent primary schools:

- 97% promote healthy lunches
- 93% have a healthy eating policy in place or are in the process of developing one.
- 99.7% reported that they do not facilitate the sale of fizzy drinks, sweets and crisps in school, either through vending machines or a school shop. However, schools are less involved in promoting the sale of healthy alternatives, with less than 3% indicating that fruit was available for sale on their premises.
- Nearly 100% provide information to pupils on the importance of a balanced diet and the food pyramid.

The responses received in relation to all of the issues highlighted above are very similar to those received for the 2009 Lifeskills survey.

Primary schools are to be congratulated for their strong engagement on this issue. It is important that policies are regularly reviewed to ensure they are being implemented, and updated as necessary.

3.2 Healthy Eating

Schools healthy eating policies should outline how the school supports healthy eating practices through the promotion of healthy lunches and healthy snacks and by other means.

The PDST continues to support the SPHE and PE curricula and, through the wider lens of this curriculum support, promotes healthy eating and activity policies (relevant material is available on www.pdst.ie and www.sphe.ie).

Regulating food intake is not the job of schools. However, schools are well placed to support pupils to develop an understanding of the nourishment of common and easily accessible food products, and facilitate the development of the skills and attitudes to make informed decisions about their food intake.

Many primary schools already address the issue of ‘treat’ foods (foods high in sugar, fat or salt) in their Healthy Eating policies and limit those foods to once a week or special celebrations.

It is recognised that the majority of primary schools do not have vending machines or school shops; however where these exist, or where pupils regularly have access to them, Principals and Boards of Management should be familiar with the advice recently issued to Post-Primary schools in Circular 0051/2015.

A range of resources are available to schools to support their work in the area of developing healthy eating practices.

These include resources from the HSE, such as the ‘Eat Smart Move More’ booklet and classroom resources, which are available at www.healthpromotion.ie/health/schools. The HSE and Department of Health will be developing new guidelines for Primary schools and others in the context of new National Healthy Eating Guidelines which are due to be published later in 2016.

There are also resources and information, such as the ‘Tastebuds’ interactive resource for primary schools developed by *safe food* and available on their website www.safe food.eu.

3.3 Food Dudes Programme

Schools are encouraged to engage with the Food Dudes programme to support healthy eating. The Food Dudes programme encourages children to eat more fruit and vegetables at schools and at home. Healthy eating remains an important issue as 1 in 4 children in Ireland are overweight or obese. In the first national rollout, 98% of primary schools completed the programme. The programme is now being implemented nationwide for a second time, to ensure the new intake of pupils are given the same opportunity to create healthy eating habits and boost efforts from senior pupils that previously took part.

Freshly prepared fruit and vegetables, rewards and Food Dudes lunchboxes will be provided free of charge to participating schools, and a designated project manager will assist in implementation. The programme in Ireland is organised by Bord Bia and is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the EU School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme. For further information on when your school can participate contact fooddudes@realnation.ie

3.4 Agri Aware's Incredible Edibles healthy eating initiative for primary level pupils

To complement their other activities which support healthy eating schools are also encouraged to explore the feasibility of joining the *Incredible Edibles* programme. Incredible Edibles is run by Agri Aware and supported by Bord Bia, the Department of Agriculture, Food & Marine, the Department of Education & Skills, the Department of Health and Ireland's fresh produce industry.

The *Incredible Edibles* healthy eating project for primary schools has been running for seven years. The project aims to educate pupils about growing fruit and vegetables and to increase their knowledge of food origin and quality. It also highlights the important role that fresh produce plays in a healthy balanced diet and the importance of consuming at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day.

Incredible Edibles encourages primary schools across Ireland to get busy in the garden and/or classroom. Participating schools are supplied with grow packs, with seeds, to grow a variety of healthy foods, such as potatoes, carrots, lettuce, strawberries and turnips. Downloadable curriculum-linked activity sheets, growing guides, recipes and logbooks allow pupils to take these important messages with them for life and to their homes and wider communities.

The *Incredible Edible* garden at the award-winning Family Farm, developed by Agri Aware and Dublin Zoo, allows primary level pupils to monitor their growing progress in line with the school year, with interactive content available weekly through the Incredible Edible's website (www.incredibleedibles.ie).

Agri Aware is currently registering schools for the 2015/2016 Incredible Edibles project. **Online registration for Agri Aware's Incredible Edibles project opened on 20 January 2016.** For more information, visit www.incredibleedibles.ie or contact Dr. Elizabeth Finnegan via email at office@agriaware.ie or telephone +353 (0)1 460 1103.

4. Promotion of physical activity

The promotion of physical activity can complement schools' efforts in relation to promoting healthy eating, as well as promoting pupils' overall mental health and well-being.

4.1 Curricular provision for Physical Education (PE)

Principals and Boards of Management are reminded that schools are required to provide PE for all pupils. The recommended time currently is one hour of PE per week at all class levels.

The data available for Lifeskills 2012 indicate that there is a need to strengthen implementation of the formal 'Physical Education' curriculum within schools.

It is of concern that a significant minority of schools (12%) indicate that in infant classes, pupils have less than one hour a week of PE. In general the amount of time provided for PE in primary schools increases as pupils progress from infants through to

sixth class. Approximately 32% of schools indicated that they offer more than one hour's PE per week for 5th and 6th classes. Younger pupils need to be given the opportunity to have full involvement in this important curricular area.

4.2 *Physical Activity*

The data from the 2012 Lifeskills survey indicate that schools continue to be extremely active in supporting pupils in physical activity outside of school hours (81% of respondent schools indicated that they are active in this area). This highlights the dedication of teachers in encouraging their pupils' participation in sporting competitions and activities even where this is not a mandatory requirement.

Schools play an important role in promoting physical activity outside of the formal PE curriculum. Physical activity is central to pupil wellbeing. Its importance extends beyond its role in achieving energy balance to, in certain cases, preventing and treating the adverse impact of overweight and obesity, alongside sensible eating practices. Adequate levels of physical activity improve cardiovascular health, metabolic health, brain and mental health, musculoskeletal health and social health across the lifespan. Emerging research has also shown a positive association between physical activity, physical fitness in children and adolescents, and academic achievement. Recent research by the ESRI has indicated that participation in activities, such as sports, can act as 'a buffer to academic stress' (ESRI, 2015).

Schools are encouraged to participate in the Active School Flag initiative which is funded by the Department of Education and Skills and supported by the Department of Health and the HSE. Further information on this initiative can be accessed at www.activeschoolflag.ie. The aim is to support and acknowledge schools that strive to achieve a physically educated and physically active school community. As of June 2015, 634 primary schools were participating.

Under the Healthy Ireland agenda, a first National Physical Activity Plan has been published by the Departments of Health, and also Transport, Tourism and Sport, along with other partners including the Department of Education and Skills (<http://health.gov.ie/blog/publications/get-ireland-active-the-national-physical-activity-plan/>). This Plan supports efforts to improve the levels of physical activity in the whole population, with a particular focus on children and young people. It aims to support the continued important contribution schools make in this regard. Actions in the plan relevant to primary schools include:

- Extend the Active School Flag programme to 500 further schools
- Fully implement the physical education curriculum for all primary pupils to meet Department of Education and Skills guidelines
- Develop and provide a programme of continuing professional development in physical education

The attention of Principals and Boards of Management is drawn to the following measures that can contribute to increasing physical activity among primary pupils and that are intended to complement the full implementation of the Physical Education curriculum:

- To build on the very good work being undertaken by most schools in promoting involvement in sport, schools should engage and work with their pupils through their student councils to increase the range of opportunities and programmes that support a greater number of pupils to adopt positive physical activity behaviours.
- The development of a school Physical Activity plan, in consultation with pupils and parents to complement the National Physical Activity Plan and using the *Get Active! Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport for Children and Young People A Guiding Framework* for guidance (<http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Get-Active-Physical-Education-Physical-Activity-and-Sport-for-Children-and-Young-People-A-Guiding-Framework.pdf>)
- The development of a Green-Schools Travel Plan, in consultation with parents, to encourage more pupils to take healthier, and more sustainable means of travelling to school such as walking and cycling (<http://www.greenschoolsireland.org/themes/travel.197.html>).

5. Resources

As well as the resources referred to elsewhere in this circular there are also a range of resources available at www.pdst.ie to support schools in promoting healthy lifestyles. Schools are advised that if they use resources from other sources, these are not endorsed or supported by the Department. Schools are advised to avoid using resources developed by the alcohol industry.

6. Conclusion

The education sector, together with our partners across relevant Government Departments and agencies, can greatly contribute to the realisation of a healthy active population, and heightening awareness of the importance of healthy lifestyle. We are committed, with your help, to ensuring that our young people have the knowledge, skills and behavioural competencies to make informed decisions to lead health-enhancing lifestyles. Schools are an integral component of our society and play a considerable transformational role in the lives of our young people. Habits created at a young age continue to inform us throughout life. But such habits must be reinforced by families and their community.

Your continued cooperation, and leadership, in contributing to the ‘Healthy Ireland’ agenda is acknowledged.

Schools are encouraged to take the initiative in reviewing and monitoring their own practices in these areas through whole-school consultation, reflection and action as part of the school self-evaluation (SSE) process. In addition, a culture of improvement relating to the promotion of healthy lifestyles in schools will be supported through whole-school evaluations, programme evaluations and reporting on the Lifeskills surveys as well as through subject inspections of Physical Education and SPHE.

**Breda Naughton
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February 2016**