



M29/95

To the Boards of Management/Authorities of Second-Level Schools

TIME IN SCHOOL

1. THE WHITE PAPER

The White Paper on Education, “Charting Our Education Future” notes that research findings indicate that the amount of time that students spend in organised learning activities has a critical bearing on their academic performance and all-round development.

The White Paper also notes the concern expressed in relation to ensuring that students’ entitlement to the minimum number of teaching days was guaranteed and, to that end, it confirmed as a policy objective that the integrity of the school year and the school day will be preserved. In accordance with the commitment outlined in the White Paper, the Minister is now issuing this circular.

In the longer term, Boards of Management/Authorities will be obliged by statute to ensure that schools adhere to the prescribed number of teaching days per annum and to the minimum number of teaching hours per day. In the interim, the policy approach, summarised below and detailed in subsequent paragraphs, will be implemented with effect from the 1995/96 school-year:

2. SUMMARY OF REQUIREMENTS UNDER THIS CIRCULAR

- The minimum number of teaching days per school year will be 167. It is stressed that this is a minimum number, which must be adhered to by all schools (and all classes within a school). In no sense should this number be regarded as a maximum for any school. The school year typically breaks down as set out overleaf.

School in operation for teaching
179
(Includes 12 days in the case of certificate Examination students)

Standards number of closings:

(a)	Saturday and Sundays	104
(b)	Permitted vacation days	60
(c)	Public and religious holidays	<u>16</u>

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- The minimum number of instruction hours per week is 28
- The minimum number of instruction per day is 6
- The minimum number of instruction per half day is 3
- Exceptional closures must, in general, be compensated for later in the school year (See Paragraph 4)

3. MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS (ELABORATION)

- A typical school day comprises of 6 hours of instruction.
- Any day on which the pupils receive instruction for less than 3 hours may not be registered as part of the 167 days minimum.
- Any day on which the pupils receive 3 hours but less than 6 hours of instruction, will be regarded as a half school day and may be registered only as a half day for purposes of compliance with the minimum school year requirement.
- Notwithstanding the above paragraph, schools may have a weekly school half-holiday subject to compliance with the requirement of a minimum of 28 hours of instruction per week.

4. EXCEPTIONAL CLOSURES

General position

Boards of management/ Authorities retain discretion in relation to the need for and duration of exceptional closures. In general, a school closure due to unforeseen circumstances, should be compensated for later in the school year. In exceptional circumstances, the Department may, on application by the school, exempt or partially exempt it from this requirement. Such exemption would be considered where, for instance, the period of absence of pupils was utilised by the school staff for essential school activities other than teaching.

Building/Maintenance

Boards of Management/Authorities are reminded that every effort must be made to have works of maintenance, building etc. carried out during vacation periods.

Adverse Weather

Subject to the requirement outlined above it is for the Board of Management/Authorities alone to determine whether it is necessary to close due to adverse weather. The Minister is aware that, during the course 1994/95 school year, in some instances information was carried on local radio to the effect that schools would be closed in advance of any actual decision by the Board of Management/Authorities concerned. Where such information is being communicated to the media, care should be taken to ensure that the role of any other Board of Management/Authority is not unwittingly usurped.

Elections

In the case of schools used as polling stations, closure on **polling day alone** will be reckoned as part of the minimum number of days.

5. COMPLIANCE WITH THE REQUIREMENTS OF THIS CIRCULAR

It is the responsibility of the Board of Management/Authorities to ensure that the terms of this circular are complied with in full.

For the purposes of monitoring compliance, it will be necessary that a certificate be completed and signed by the School Principal and countersigned by the Manager/Chairperson of the Board of Management /Chief Executive Officer of the Vocational Education Committee. This Certificate must be submitted to the Department on an annual basis.

Roll/Attendance books must be open for inspection by the department as part of the process of ensuring compliance with the requirements of this Circular.

Compliance with the Department's requirements on the length of the school day and the school year are basic conditions under which grants, are paid to schools. Grants may be reduced if these conditions are not met.

As an alternative to a reduction in grants, the Minister may choose to reduce the number of vacation days as a sanction where the required minimum has not been achieved or to require that days lost be worked in the following school year.

6 GOOD PRACTICE BY BOARDS OF MANAGEMENT/AUTHORITIES.

Boards of Management/Authorities should assess critically each proposal for closure of its school on days not occurring during the school vacation, in order to determine whether closure of the school is in the best interests of the pupils.

In order to guarantee that its school is in operation for the prescribed minimum number of days, Boards of Management/Authorities, in planning the school year, should make allowance for days on which the school may have to be closed due to unforeseen or exceptional circumstances. The Department will only abate the minimum requirements of 167 days where the Board of Management/Authorities can satisfy it that the circumstances that warranted additional closures were entirely exceptional and that, as a consequence, it would not have been possible to achieve the required minimum over the remaining days of the school year.

Boards of Management/Authorities should bear in mind that events which might require the exceptional closure of a school to pupils (e.g. adverse weather) may not necessarily justify the non-attendance of teaching staff. Boards of Management/Authorities should, therefore, ensure that the school plan incorporates a strategy for the use of such days by the teaching staff for essential school activities other than teaching.

7. PROVIDING INFORMATION TO PARENTS.

Each managerial authority should give parents at the beginning of each year a calendar of events in the school, including details of length of school year and closures. It should of course be made clear that the calendar could be subject to change in the event of a closure for an exceptional cause, but that, as a general rule, any unforeseen closure would be compensated for later in the school year.

It is suggested that school managers could usefully engage in discussion locally with parents concerning the practical arrangements which will apply when closures occur at short notice.

The Minister proposes to publish from time to time details of the annual period of operations of schools.

Board of Management/Authorities are requested to provide a copy of this Circular to the parents' and teachers' representative of the Board of Management, where such exists, and to the parents' association/National Parents' Council Representatives or other appropriate representatives of the parents/teachers for transmission to individual parents and teachers.

8. POSITION OF 6 "REMAINING DAYS"

It is intended that the 6 "Remaining Days" will be used for certain school related activities, such as parent/teacher meetings and school/curricular planning.

This matter will be the subject of an agreed Circular following the forthcoming negotiations to be held in the context of the Programme for Competitiveness and Work. Pending the outcome of these negotiations schools may continue to conduct these activities with the 167 days specified in this Circular provided that:

- (i) the time spent on these activities accords with that specified in paragraph 3 in relation to the length of a full day and a half day, and
- (ii) the Board of Management and Principal certify the time spent on these activities.

Don Thornhill
Secretary.
August, 1995.