

Report by the Working Group on



School Opening/ Closure Arrangements

September 2011



Department of
Education

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Chair's Foreword

This year (2010/11) has certainly proved exceptional in terms of weather conditions and many schools, my own included, were forced into closure – exceptional closure!

The extreme conditions and the large number of schools affected have certainly brought into focus the whole process of decision-making and communication and it was opportune for the Department of Education to set up a Working Group to see how schools coped and if there were any practical improvements which could be made or how we could learn from each other.

Bringing together so many facets of the Education family has highlighted to me that, whilst decision-making may often be driven by “common sense”, there are many considerations to be made and factors to be assessed when deciding to close a school. The expertise and experience of all involved has been most valuable and I wish to thank all for their enthusiasm and commitment. I hope that the report will provide a platform for improvement whilst giving Principals in our schools the background information to assist in their decision-making.

Global warming may indicate that future weather patterns may impact even on us in Northern Ireland, so it is prudent to be as prepared as we can be.

My thanks again to all those who contributed and especially to the Department officials and secretariat whose help was invaluable.

Stanley Poots

Principal

Dromara Primary School

Introduction

1. The severe weather conditions in Northern Ireland in November and December 2010 resulted in an unprecedented number of schools having to close. The resulting queries from schools, parents and the media highlighted a considerable degree of confusion and misunderstanding over the legal requirements governing the number of days that schools must be in operation: the different types of school closure; the arrangements for reporting closures; and the arrangements for notifying parents.
2. As a result, the Department of Education established a Working Group on School Opening/Closure Arrangements to explore how the legislative and other arrangements governing school days of operation and closures might be better explained and communicated to schools, parents and the wider public. This report contains the findings of the Group.
3. The Group was chaired by Stanley Poots, MBE, Principal of Dromara Primary School, and included representatives from the Primary, Post-Primary, Special and Irish Medium sectors, the Education and Library Boards (ELBs), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), Trade Unions and NI Direct. The Department of Education and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) attended as observers. The Department also provided the secretariat to the Group. Full details of members can be found at Annex 1 to this report.
4. The Group met on 3 occasions.

Terms of Reference

5. The terms of reference set by the Department of Education are provided below:

Terms of Reference:

Working within existing legislative requirements governing the number of days during which schools must be in operation and teaching pupils in classrooms, to provide recommendations to DE on how the

definitions, explanations and communication of these arrangements might be improved to facilitate understanding among schools, parents and others and to ensure clarity.

And

Looking specifically at the arrangements for exceptional closures, to identify how best to apply these arrangements in a way that:

- ❖ recognises the central role of the Principal in reaching a judgement that an exceptional closure is necessary;
 - ❖ provides advice on factors to be taken into consideration in reaching that judgement;
 - ❖ minimises bureaucracy at school level;
 - ❖ puts pupils and teachers and their health and safety to the forefront, while recognising also the importance of ensuring that pupils' education is not disrupted;
 - ❖ maintains the confidence of parents and local communities;
 - ❖ ensures compliance with Departmental and legislative requirements; and
 - ❖ facilitates effective and timely communication of decisions to close schools, particularly to parents, but also to those who provide services to schools, for example transport and school meals.
6. The Department also asked the Group to ensure that any recommendations it made were realistic and capable of being implemented within available financial and staff resources (whether at Department, Board or school level).

Group's Approach

7. The Group approached its terms of reference with a determination to ensure that recommendations were practical and sensible, and that they reflected, and were informed by, the experiences of members, particularly during the recent winter weather.

8. The Group recognised from the outset the importance of avoiding unnecessary disruption to children's education through closure. Members shared experiences of the efforts made by Principals and other school staff to keep schools open wherever possible and highlighted the need to make sure that any recommendations were designed to help schools minimise the need for weather-related closure.
9. The Group also recognised that, while Principals will always strive to keep their schools open, it will sometimes be necessary for them to take the decision to close for reasons outside their control. For example, closure may have to be considered in periods of adverse weather if the Principal has health and safety concerns relating to entering and exiting the school, or if so few teachers can get into school that too high a Pupil:Teacher Ratio (PTR) results.
10. In such circumstances schools can apply to the Department for "exceptional closure days". These closures should be kept to a minimum, particularly in view of their impact on children's education, but also to reduce the problems posed to parents, staff and the transport and school meals services.
11. Making a decision to close a school is very difficult and complex, and the timing and communication of decisions is also difficult in a context where a decision to close can often only be taken on the morning of a school day. There is therefore a careful balance to be struck between avoiding unnecessary closure and ensuring that parents, pupils and staff have as much notice as possible in the event that closure is the only viable option. We acknowledge from the outset that such decisions should only be made by the Principal or his/her nominated representative.
12. The Group hopes that this report and the recommendations it contains will enhance the already robust approach taken in relation to school closures. The aim should be to keep exceptional closures to a minimum, but, when they are necessary, to close for as short a time as possible. The recommendations also seek to make the decision-making process more transparent, and thus more easily understood by people both inside and outside the education sector.

Collation of Material to Inform the Work of the Group

13. The work of the Group was informed by the following:
 - a. Reports received from each of the Education and Library Boards detailing information on the reasons for school closures and the actions that the Boards can take to minimise future disruption to schools.
 - b. Replies received from each of the Education and Library Boards and CCMS to a request from the Department to review their response to the severe weather experienced in December to January 2010-11. Reports from the Education and Library Boards indicated that emergency planning arrangements had operated extremely well. The vigilance and actions of school Principals, school building supervisors and Board maintenance teams made an immense contribution to ensuring that only a small number of schools across the estate remained unable to open following the Christmas break. However, with over 300 school properties affected by frozen and burst water pipes, the Department and the Education and Library Boards examined the lessons learned from an estate perspective and will report separately.
 - c. A meeting with the Health and Safety Officers within the Education and Library Boards.
 - d. A meeting with C2k and NI Direct to discuss the possibility of a service-wide texting service being made available to all schools through C2k.

Findings of the Working Group

14. We consider that the procedures in place during the severe weather in November and December 2010 had, in general, worked very well given the extreme circumstances in which everyone was operating. There is, however, no reason to be complacent, and the Group was established to investigate how procedures might be improved. The key issues in our terms of reference are the recognition of the central role of the Principal in deciding whether closure is necessary, and the need

to communicate with parents and others if closure is decided on. We considered them under the following headings.

- a. How to support Principals in decisions to close, and to provide a basis for consistency in their decision-making.
- b. How the requirements of Health and Safety can be assessed and met.
- c. The need for clarity about the different types of closure available to schools.
- d. The need for consistency of treatment of staff (teaching and non-teaching) during periods of exceptional closure.
- e. How to establish effective and well-understood communication arrangements between schools and relevant people and organisations.

They are discussed in more detail below.

Supporting school Principals

15. We welcome the recognition within the Department of Education that decisions on whether it was necessary to close a school could only be made by Principals, or their nominated representative “on the ground”, as having the local knowledge and experience to assess the situation in their own schools. While we also welcome the clear support shown for Principals in reaching a judgement on whether to close or remain open, we feel that further action is needed to ensure that Principals are assisted and supported in making such decisions.
16. Principals need to be confident that their judgements and ultimately their decisions will be respected. In turn, parents need to be informed about, and have confidence in, the decision-making process.
17. Principals need information on the factors they should consider in making a timely and informed decision about a school closure. The key factors include:
 - ❖ health and safety requirements;

- ❖ PTRs;
- ❖ weather conditions and forecasts*;
- ❖ road conditions*; and
- ❖ transport availability*.

* These should be assessed not just in the locality of the school but also in the areas from which pupils and teachers have to travel.

18. We therefore drew up the brief checklist for Principals attached at Annex 2. It is supplemented by Severe Weather Safety Guidelines for Schools (Annex 3) and a note on school days of operation and closures (Annex 4). **We recommend that:**

- a. **DE arranges to issue this checklist to all schools and keeps it under review; and**
- b. **Principals use this checklist when they are considering whether to close their schools.**

Annexes 2-4 represent both a comprehensive source of information for Principals when deciding whether to close their schools, and a means of ensuring that, as far as possible, the decisions they make are based on a common approach and a common set of considerations and criteria. As a result, decisions by Principals facing similar circumstances will have a consistency which is sometimes perceived to be lacking at the moment. **For ease of reference the checklist and supporting Annexes should be placed on education partner websites.** Annex 4 makes it clear that schools are not required to make up days lost due to exceptional closure but explains that there may be cases where a school wishes, in consultation with staff, to make up lost teaching time.

19. It is important that decisions are made as far in advance of closure as possible – the night before closure if circumstances allow - and that parents are informed quickly. While it may not be possible for Principals to make such a decision the night before, going through the checklist will help to focus on the key issues to be considered and enable them to come to a decision as early as possible. Decisions

the night before can only be taken when all the indications (weather forecasts, current situation regards roads/transport, etc) are that adverse conditions will continue overnight. If there are doubts, Principals should defer decisions until early morning.

Health and Safety

20. Health and safety is usually the main driver of any decision. We know that decisions to close schools were sometimes unpopular, but the health and safety of both pupils and staff was overwhelmingly the key element in those decisions. Principals had to consider not only getting pupils and staff into school, but also keeping them safe when they were there and getting them out again should an emergency arise.
21. The likely PTR is also a key issue when determining in advance if a school can remain open. Schools should include viability criteria for PTR within their emergency plans each year, and the need for early consideration of PTR viability should be reflected in the checklist.
22. We recognise that there are additional health and safety issues to be taken into account by schools which have pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities. Wheelchair access and emergency exits have to be kept clear, and the ability of emergency services to reach the school quickly must be taken into account when considering closure.
23. To inform the way forward in relation to health and safety, the Chair of the Group and Department representatives met Education and Library Board Health and Safety (H&S) Officers. As a follow-up to this meeting the Boards' H&S Officers prepared safety guidelines for schools when considering closure due to severe weather. These are attached as Annex 3.
24. **We recommend schools should consider the Health and Safety guidelines during the first term, before the onset of adverse weather and put in place an appropriate action plan.** Assistance can be sought from Health and Safety personnel within the Education and Library Boards.

The need for clarity about the different types of closure available to schools

25. A brief questionnaire prepared and issued by the Chair to primary schools in the Lisburn area highlighted that a majority of schools were aware of the various types of school closure and the legal position in relation to them. However, we understand that the period of exceptional closures during November and December 2010 raised the issue of whether there was a need to make up days lost through exceptional closure.
26. We have therefore included, as Annex 4, a brief summary:
 - a. clarifying the number of days schools are required to be in operation in a school year;
 - b. explaining the various types of school closure; and
 - c. noting the position on making up lost days.

The need for consistency of treatment of staff (teaching and non-teaching)

27. Although outside our remit, the issue of inconsistency of treatment among and between teaching and non-teaching staff was raised by Trade Union colleagues as a concern. In schools equally affected by bad weather, some teachers were told to report for work while others were told to stay at home. The instructions did not appear to take account of the length or difficulty of the journey involved. This sometimes created tension between schools in similar circumstances. The Unions also reported inconsistencies in payment arrangements for substitute teachers. They were asked to forward details of their concerns to the Department.

Communication

28. The communication of the details of closures to relevant parties was highlighted by the Group as a vital issue for schools. We noted that the need to improve communication was identified by each of the

Education and Library Boards in its review of procedures during the adverse weather. **We recommend that the Education and Library Boards establish a communications Group comprising their communications officers to co-ordinate more effectively the Boards' responses to emergencies of a regional nature.**

29. In the paragraphs below we consider communication under the following headings: schools and parents; schools and staff; schools and transport services; schools and education partners; informing the public.

Communication – schools and parents

30. **The Group recommends that, at the start of each school year, and in consultation with parents, schools should decide on the communication method or methods that best suit parents' needs and resources. Schools should then ensure that all parents and staff clearly understand the communication method(s) that will be used in the case of closure.** It will also be important for schools to be as helpful as possible to parents and to try to maintain contact by sending updates on the current situation at the school.
31. While recognising that it is a matter for each school to determine its own communication strategy, we have identified the following main options for communication.

a. Mobile texting services

- i. Some schools already have in place a system for texting parents to inform them about a school closure. While not all parents have mobile phones, Principals on the Group suggested that such a service could contact 90% of parents. We consider this to be a very effective means of communication as parents can be notified of a closure just after the decision is taken. Parents can also be kept informed as necessary by this method. We acknowledge that this should not be the only method of communication, but it is one that all schools should consider using.

ii. We met C2k and NI Direct staff to discuss the possibility of procuring a mobile texting service from Principal to parents provided through the C2k service. The C2k procurement currently underway may allow for the inclusion of such a service, but that will not be clear until the full scope of the contract is agreed later this year. Such a service would allow for quality information to be fed quickly to parents and organisations across a range of communication channels.

iii. We recommend that the Department of Education should consider the possibility of a service-wide mobile texting service being made available to all schools through C2k, as well as consideration of other viable options to improve communication between schools and parents.

b. The media – television, regional and local radio

We recognise that the public service broadcasting role of the BBC was particularly helpful. Through this service, schools could email the BBC with details of their closure and the information provided was uploaded to a BBC web page and the BBC Ceefax system. Principals were provided with a password to use when notifying the BBC as an assurance that the information being received was genuine. However, the sheer volume of closures, combined with some problems relating to passwords and accurate school information, meant that there were delays in uploading the information at the speed required to maintain an up-to-date list.

c. Emailing services

This is a limited means of communication as not all parents have easy access to the internet/email.

d. Other means of communication

Schools should also consider supplementary means of communication such as messages left on the school answering machine or on the school's website.

32. Communication via text or email will require schools to have in place an appropriate procedure for ensuring parents' contact details are reviewed and updated on a regular basis. Where one or both of these options are chosen, schools should inform parents as part of their fair processing procedures under data protection rules that their personal data held by the school will be used for this purpose.

Communication – schools and staff

33. We recognise that communication is not the sole responsibility of the Principal – staff also need to keep their Principal informed of their own circumstances. This is critical to inform the Principal of the probable PTR. Teachers often travel long distances to school and good communication is vital to avoid any misunderstanding as to whether schools are open or closed. Schools need to ensure that they have appropriate arrangements in place to allow two way communication between Principals and their staff in exceptional circumstances. Temporary staff should also be included in such arrangements.

Communication – schools and transport services

34. The adverse weather demonstrated that there is a need for effective communication between schools and transport services, and that transport services face the same problems in such conditions as everyone else. We were informed that Translink has in place severe weather guidelines for drivers and management, and that it operates a safety management system in case of major incidents. WELB, which has a high proportion of rural schools, has informed us that it had a very positive relationship with Translink during the periods of extreme weather in 2010 and that lines of communication had been effective. We are advised that Translink has expressed an interest in meeting the Boards to discuss potential transport difficulties. Such a meeting would be a good opportunity to formulate plans to minimise future disruption. **We recommend that the Education and Library Boards should take up the offer of a meeting with Translink, and consider agreement on the protocols to be put in place during periods of severe weather, ie, who within transport providers' hierarchies may determine whether a particular service is provided or not.**

Communication - schools and education partners

35. If the mobile texting service recommended at 31 a.iii. is put in place then, from the NI Direct website perspective, once a closure is reported there would be an opportunity to look at how the information could be shared online with the media and other interested parties including the Education and Library Boards, the Department of Education and CCMS. Linked to the mobile texting service recommendation, **we recommend that the Department of Education should consider the use of the NI Direct platform to assist schools in their communications with the media and other interested organisations.**

Communication - informing the public

36. The wider public has an interest in knowing about the decision-making process which is undertaken by school Principals and in understanding that a decision to close a school is not taken lightly.
37. **We recommend that a leaflet for parents should be prepared by the Department of Education explaining the decision-making process and outlining the health and safety issues that need to be considered by school Principals in deciding to close a school. This leaflet will be distributed to parents by schools.**
38. **We recommend that the parents' leaflet should be proactively promoted and published on the following websites: Department of Education; the Education and Library Boards; NI Direct; and schools.**

Next Steps

39. **We recommend that the Department of Education should develop a plan setting out actions to be taken to address the recommendations in this report and the Group's report should be placed on the Department's website. The action plan should be considered along with the recommendations from the estate-based work commissioned by the Department, which summarised lessons learned from across the education estate and highlighted areas where improvements might be made.**

Summary of Recommendations

40. This section contains a summary of the recommendations for schools, Boards and the Department (detailed in the order in which they are presented within the report):
- i. Principals need information on the factors they should consider in making a timely and informed decision about a school closure. We recommend that the Department issues the checklist at Annexes 2-4 of this report to all schools and keeps it under review. We also recommend that Principals use the checklist when they are considering whether or not to close their school. For ease of reference the checklist should be placed on education partner websites. (Paragraph 18a. and b.)
 - ii. Health and Safety Guidelines (Annex 3) have been drawn up by ELB Health & Safety Officers. Schools should consider the guidelines during the first term, before the onset of adverse weather, and put in place an appropriate action plan. (Paragraph 24)
 - iii. We recommend that the Education and Library Boards establish a communications Group comprising their communications officers to co-ordinate more effectively the Boards' responses to emergencies of a regional nature. (Paragraph 28)
 - iv. We recommend that, at the start of each school year, and in consultation with parents, schools should decide on the communication method or methods that best suit parents' needs and resources. Schools should then ensure that all parents and staff clearly understand the communication method(s) that will be used in the case of closure. (Paragraph 30)

- v. We recommend that the Department of Education should consider the possibility of a service-wide mobile texting service being made available to all schools through C2k, as well as consideration of other viable options to improve communication between schools and parents. (Paragraph 31a.iii.)
 - vi. We recommend that the Education and Library Boards should take up the offer of a meeting with Translink, and consider agreement on the protocols to be put in place during periods of severe weather, ie, who within transport providers' hierarchies may determine whether a particular service is provided or not. (Paragraph 34)
 - vii. We recommend that the Department of Education should consider the use of the NI Direct platform to assist schools in their communications with the media and other interested organisations. (Paragraph 35)
 - viii. We recommend that a leaflet for parents should be prepared by the Department of Education explaining the decision-making process and outlining the health and safety issues that need to be considered by school Principals in deciding to close a school. This leaflet will be distributed to parents by schools. (Paragraph 37)
 - ix. We recommend that the parents' leaflet should be proactively promoted and published on the following websites: Department of Education; the Education and Library Boards; NI Direct; and schools. (Paragraph 38)
41. We recommend that the Department of Education should develop a plan setting out actions to be taken to address the recommendations in this report and the Group's report should be placed on the Department's website. The action plan should be considered along with the recommendations from the estate-based work commissioned by the Department, which summarised lessons learned from across the education estate and highlighted areas where improvements might be made. (Paragraph 39)

Conclusion

42. The Group hopes that acceptance and implementation of the recommendations in this report will result in a more transparent and effective approach being taken in relation to school closures in the future. We also hope that those within and outside the education system will be more understanding of how such decisions are taken, and that this in turn will give due recognition of the role and responsibilities of Principals and improve confidence in the decision-making process.

Annex 1

Members of the Working Group on School Closure/Opening Arrangements

Stanley Poots MBE, Principal of Dromara Primary School (Chair)

Colm Davis, Principal of Tor Bank Special School

Avril Hall-Callaghan, UTU

Dooley Harte, NIPSA

Gerry Lundy, CCMS

Cate Magee, Principal of St Patrick's College, Ballymena

Mark McLaughlin, NI Direct

Stephanie Murphy, Western Education and Library Board

Maire Ni Dhochartaigh, C Na G

Seamus Searson, NASUWT

In attendance

Peter Geoghegan, Education and Training Inspectorate (Observer)

Sharon Lawlor, Department of Education

Secretariat

Helen McConkey

Heather McCullough

Exceptional Closures – Working Group’s Checklist for Principals

An exceptional closure is unplanned, and is due to unforeseen circumstances such as adverse weather conditions, power failure, or situations which affect the safety of pupils and staff. Exceptional closures require approval from the Department of Education to allow a school to reduce its operational days below the 200 required by legislation.

It is important that each school should put in place (and subsequently review) an action plan during the first term of each school year, before the onset of adverse weather. In doing so, it should consider the Health and Safety guidelines at Annex 3. Assistance can be sought from Health and Safety personnel within the Education and Library Boards.

In times of extreme weather, such as a heavy snowfall, Principals should consider this checklist as far in advance of closure as possible – the night before closure if circumstances allow - and, if necessary, decide to close the school the next day. This will allow early communication with parents and staff and ensure that parents are informed quickly. While it may not be possible for Principals to make such a decision the night before, going through the checklist will help to focus on the key issues to be considered and enable them to come to a decision as early as possible. Decisions the night before can only be taken when all the indications are that adverse conditions will continue overnight. If there are doubts, Principals should defer decisions until early morning.

Local conditions will determine the decision of the Principal (or an agreed deputy such as the Chairman of the Board of Governors or a senior teacher), who will consider a number of agreed criteria for closure. Decisions taken must be applicable to each individual school – not based on neighbouring schools whose conditions may differ.

Issues to consider

The following should be considered in coming to any decision to close for exceptional reasons. The headline items listed below are dealt with in more detail in Annex 3.

- ❖ Health and safety questions, including:
 - ◆ can pupils and staff access the school building safely?
 - ◆ can pupils and staff be evacuated in an emergency?
 - ◆ in an emergency, could the Emergency Services access the school?
 - ◆ is the area designated for disembarkation from transport safe for pupils?
- ❖ Transport – can buses, meal deliveries, etc., reach the school, particularly if the unforeseen circumstances affect a large proportion of pupils?
- ❖ If a limited number of staff and pupils can attend, is the PTR acceptable? An indication of the acceptable PTR should be included in the school’s emergency plans for such events.
- ❖ Have local weather forecasts and road conditions, including those for areas from which staff will be travelling, been considered?

If a decision is made to close

Communication

- ❖ Schools should have in place an agreed plan on communication, not only to advise parents and staff, and keep them informed, but also to advise the relevant Education and Library Board, the Department of Education, and CCMS if appropriate. The Department’s school reference number should be quoted in all correspondence. (See Step 4 of Annex 3 for relevant contact details for Boards, the Department and CCMS.)

- ❖ Suggested means of communication include use of a texting service, informing the media (television and/or radio), email, or telephone (either calls or a recorded message.)
- ❖ Parents must be aware of the means of communication that will be used.
- ❖ If possible, update parents/staff at a later time in the day with a view to the “next day” so that all have time to make suitable family arrangements.
- ❖ Staff should also be encouraged to keep the school updated on their position (2-way communication is vital).

Health and Safety

Schools should consider the Health and Safety guidelines during the first term, before the onset of adverse weather and put in place an appropriate action plan. Assistance can be sought from Health and Safety personnel within the Education and Library Boards.

Overall responsibility for health and safety risk in schools lies with the employing authority, ie ELBs for Controlled schools, CCMS for Maintained schools etc. School Governors are responsible for the day to day management of health and safety in a school. Risk is identified and controlled through Risk Assessment. School Governors and Principals should consult the guidance on Risk Assessment in the schools' Health and Safety Manual – A Manual for Principals and Governors. In addition to this, a number of generic risk assessments and advice on completion are available at each of the Boards' websites.

Controlled Schools

The Health and Safety Officers advise schools within each Board on how to conduct risk assessments on hazards, and advise them on remedial action.

Maintained Schools

CCMS is the employing authority for all teaching staff in CCMS schools. The responsibility for management of the premises rests with the Boards of Governors of such schools as set out in Article 23 of the Scheme of Management of CCMS schools. CCMS does not have any dedicated health and safety staff, but Board staff will advise maintained schools in their area, although there is no statutory requirement for them to do so.

Voluntary Grammar, Irish Medium and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools

Health and safety is entirely the responsibility of the school's governing body.

Severe Weather Warning – Safety Guidelines for Schools

Introduction

The decision to open a school during periods of severe weather is dependent upon the Principal carrying out a risk assessment.

The risk assessment requires to be thought out in advance of any severe weather so that, when it is required to be undertaken then it is a relatively straight forward process.

This guidance is set out in order to assist the school Principal in deciding whether it is safe to open and continue school during severe weather or whether the school should close.

The guidance is split into 4 key steps:

Step 1 Preparation

Step 2 Points to consider when deciding to open a school

Step 3 Risk Assessment (this includes a blank risk assessment template for completion by the Principal)

Step 4 Key websites and contacts

Step 1 – Preparation

The following points require to be taken into account when preparing a plan to deal with a possible exceptional closure due to severe weather.

<i>Key Action</i>	<i>Supplementary Actions</i>
<p>Does the school have contact details for all parents/guardians, pupils and staff.</p> <p>Does the school have contact details for the relevant ELB emergency on call officers?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Are the contact details updated regularly. ❖ Do they include Mobile Telephone numbers?
<p>Where fuel oil is required. Ensure that fuel level is checked regularly and appropriate levels maintained.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Set a minimum fuel level for a reorder of supply. ❖ Check fuel level frequently during severe weather periods.
<p>Ensure that heating, lighting and water services are regularly maintained.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Regularly report maintenance issues to the Board Maintenance Help Desk. ❖ Have the Boards Help desk/emergency on call officer telephone numbers available
<p>Maintain sufficient supplies of salt for application to footpaths and driveways.</p> <p>Where mechanical salt spreaders are utilized, are they functioning and available?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Order supplies before the onset of winter. ❖ Have the salt suppliers' telephone numbers available or follow board procedure to reorder.
<p>Maintain stocks of Safety Signs and Hazard Warning Tapes for cordoning off hazardous areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Order supplies of Hazard tape (yellow/black or red/white). ❖ Order signs which prohibit access to hazardous areas.

<i>Key Action</i>	<i>Supplementary Actions</i>
<p>Maintain a system for communicating with Teachers, Building Supervisors, Maintenance Help Desk, Catering staff and other supervisory staff. Also schools' transport service.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Schools should have in place appropriate procedures to ensure that the Principal and staff have an effective means of 2-way communication to determine the level of attendance. ❖ Maintain contact details of the Boards' School Transport Service.
<p>Prepare a risk assessment which considers the foreseeable risks at times of severe weather.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Use the Risk Assessment pro-forma set out in Section C Step 3 – Risk Assessment. ❖ What parts of the school or routes are most susceptible to the effects of severe weather.
<p>Avoiding Slips, Trips and Falls at access points into the school building.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Maintain adequate supplies of mops and wet trip mats. ❖ Increased vigilance from Building Supervisor/staff to ensure points of access are kept in safe condition. ❖ Use of warning cones/signs.
<p>Prepare and maintain local contact details for the following services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Meteorological Service ❖ NI Water ❖ Road Service ❖ Rivers Agency ❖ NI Direct ❖ Education and Library Board ❖ CCMS ❖ Department of Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Put each of these services' websites on your favourite folder in the web provider. ❖ Access the sites and become familiar with the layout and where to look for the appropriate information. ❖ Refresh favourites regularly.

Step 2 – Points to consider when deciding to open the school

The decision to open the school or to continue to operate the school is dependent upon the Principal carrying out a risk assessment. The risk assessment needs to be reviewed and updated in the light of changes in the weather and circumstances.

The following points are key considerations when determining whether to open or close the school. They also form an integral part of the risk assessment process and will allow the Principal to prepare a school specific risk assessment.

<i>First Consideration</i>	<i>Other Consideration(s)</i>
Is the school building accessible?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ What are the forecasted long-term weather conditions? ❖ Are there any Northern Ireland Met Office warnings available?
Are there any areas within the school locality especially impassable or dangerous in times of extreme bad weather?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Consideration should be given to getting to and from the school. In the case of one-way traffic systems, the route into school may be a lesser gradient than the route away. ❖ There may be locations on the journey where snow/ice is known to cause early closure of roads or rail. ❖ Alternative routes where possible should be identified prior to extreme bad weather to help the traveller to decide their route.
Are vehicle routes into the school grounds passable?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Is there means to improve access prior to teachers' attendance, or attendance of school buses, parent/carers' vehicles, etc? ❖ Is parking possible outside the school grounds until remedial action has been taken to make the area passable? If a main pedestrian route, inside the school grounds, is through a vehicle parking area then vehicles should be excluded. There may be a need for signage to this effect.

<i>First Consideration</i>	<i>Other Consideration(s)</i>
Are pedestrian routes on the school grounds passable?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Is there means to clear these routes, eg salt/grit? ❖ If required, can movement to various parts of the school be limited without disruption – ensuring maintenance is concerted to general access routes? ❖ Can priority be made in respect to slopes, steps or ramps, or can these areas be restricted from use? Outside metal staircases should also be avoided unless appropriately treated. ❖ If open, vehicle parking areas should have a passable pedestrian route to access the school.
Can the Principal gain enough teaching and/or supervisory staff to operate safely?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ The emphasis would be to operate safely. ❖ What would be the threshold of staff numbers in respect to expected pupils. ❖ For primary schools, pupils would likely be local, with a greater expectancy of attendance. Schools in rural areas or Post Primary schools may have pupils from a wider area and may be more dependent on school buses or public transport. Therefore numbers may be less – and supervision easier.
Is the school appropriately heated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Are fuel supplies adequate? ❖ Have there been previous failures of the heating system in autumn/winter months? ❖ Is the means for remedial action readily available?
Are water systems working appropriately? (Welfare)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Are there known faults in times of severe weather? ❖ Are there written records – ensuring methodical checks are made?
Can the level of heating be maintained throughout the school day/week?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ At times of severe weather consider running the heating system during periods of closure or holidays. ❖ Is frost protection installed and utilised?

<i>First Consideration</i>	<i>Other Consideration(s)</i>
Can people movement be minimised between school buildings, if access and egress is made externally?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ If pupil numbers are low, can classes be grouped together? ❖ Can these areas be cleared and maintained to limit the restriction?
Restriction of outside play would limit the snow/ice from becoming compacted, and therefore more dangerous.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ If conditions are not dangerous outside play may be possible. However supervision may have to be higher. ❖ Could play or breaks be staggered to ensure appropriate supervisory levels? ❖ If any snow or ice is present prohibit running.
Can the school grounds be maintained to effect opening the following day?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Pedestrian walkways should be a priority, over vehicle parking, but in the long term parking areas inside the school should be treated, or cleared of snow. Persons who have parked in the school grounds should be aware of the priority and told to take care in this area. Signs could be placed to remind these persons. ❖ Maintenance should be a priority where pedestrian walkways also coincide with vehicle areas. Alternatively, restrictions could be made on pedestrians, or cars stopped from entering that area.
Monitor the weather situation locally and through the media (Met Office).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Government Agencies such as the Roads Service may be able to provide information regarding road clearance, providing assurance of home journeys, or return journeys the following day. ❖ Met Office provide flash weather warnings (see Met Office website).

<i>First Consideration</i>	<i>Other Consideration(s)</i>
<p>Are maintenance materials and personnel available to ensure the school can eliminate, reduce or isolate risk throughout the school day?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Can similar provision be assured for the following day(s)? ❖ Salt/grit spread on walkways or other areas at the end of the day could limit icing. This could also prevent a further snowfall from taking a foothold and re-icing. ❖ Slush or water from thawed snow/ice should be cleared as much as possible to prevent re-icing. Iced slush could be more dangerous than the initial fall as surfaces may be uneven and more slippery.

Step 3 – Risk Assessment

a. *Generic Risk Assessment – Severe weather - Ice/Snow*

The following Generic Risk Assessment provides Principals with a base of information for them to devise their own risk assessment.

This generic risk assessment along with the information in the previous steps should provide the Principal with an awareness of the risks involved. This level of awareness should also contribute to the Principal creating their own risk assessment based upon the specific requirements of the school, its size and the manageability of the issue.

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Hazard</i>	<i>Persons who may be at risk</i>	<i>Controls required</i>	<i>Further considerations</i>
Getting to the school.	Dangerous travel in extreme bad weather conditions.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff, pupils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Principal monitors weather conditions/ warnings www.metoffice.gov.uk ❖ No travel should be considered if extreme bad weather warning and advice given for only essential journeys to be undertaken. 	<p>Rural location of school and/ or majority of school personnel.</p> <p>Regional warnings may not be accurate at local level, so local media broadcasts may also help.</p>

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Hazard</i>	<i>Persons who may be at risk</i>	<i>Controls required</i>	<i>Further considerations</i>
Travel via known areas of expected road closure or steep gradients.	Dangerous travel in extreme bad weather conditions.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff.	❖ Prior planning by staff regarding alternative 'main road' routes, or rail, to school location.	Walking may be reasonably expected, when cars or other vehicles cannot make it all the way into the school. Principal to consider what is reasonable based on locality and staff.
Main entrance into school grounds.	Entrance not possible.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff.	❖ Park car outside school until clearance can be made. If not passable by foot, access other reasonable means into the school.	Signage on main entrance, or other entrances if prohibited from entry due to ice or other obstruction.
Main entrance into school grounds.	Entrance an immediate slip hazard.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff, pupils, parents/ carers and visitors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Clearance of slip hazard, unless alternative route found. ❖ Other routes may be prioritised and cause closure of the main entrance. ❖ Salt/grit may be adequate but manual work may also be required to clear snow/ice if this is the main and only entrance. 	If entrance is used by both vehicles and pedestrians, salting/gritting may be a priority. Cars may be stopped from entry to give priority to pedestrians and avoid risk.

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Hazard</i>	<i>Persons who may be at risk</i>	<i>Controls required</i>	<i>Further considerations</i>
Getting appropriate members of staff to open school.	Inadequate supervision	Teachers and pupils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ A means of communicating with school staff in order to establish their attendance on the day of extreme bad weather. ❖ A means to communicate with school bus service, local authority and local bus service operators to establish pupil means of getting to school. ❖ Principal to establish what would constitute appropriate supervision - through dynamic assessment on the day of extreme bad weather. 	<p>The emphasis should be on how to operate safely, not whether a full and normal curriculum could be followed.</p> <p>Primary school pupils are likely to be local, with a greater expectancy of attendance. Schools in rural areas or secondary schools have pupils from a wider area and may be more dependent on school buses or public transport, therefore numbers may be less – and supervision easier.</p>

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Hazard</i>	<i>Persons who may be at risk</i>	<i>Controls required</i>	<i>Further considerations</i>
Heating and Welfare facilities.	Cold – below permitted work level (16° C/ 60.8° F). No sanitary or drinking water.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff, contractors and pupils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Constant heating throughout periods of known cold snaps to prevent frozen pipes. ❖ Maintenance of water systems, for example prompt repair of leaks and drips. ❖ Regular maintenance staff checks to ensure heating and water systems are working well. 	If the school premises cannot be heated or provision of water for sanitary use or drinking cannot be made within school hours then the school may have to close.
Keeping the school open.	Slips, trips or falls of pupils at break-time.	Pupils and Supervisory Assistants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ No use of yards and other external areas, when snow/ice cannot be easily removed or reduced. ❖ If there are external areas free or generally free of snow/ice, supervised play/break can be undertaken. ❖ The supervision level should be higher and running prohibited. 	Certain areas could be cordoned off and managed through salting/ gritting prior to releasing for use. Melted snow/ice can refreeze so continued attention may be needed.

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Hazard</i>	<i>Persons who may be at risk</i>	<i>Controls required</i>	<i>Further considerations</i>
Keeping the school open (contd).			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Any areas of snow/ice remaining should be avoided and managed. ❖ Pupils should be informed of restrictions. 	If yard space is restricted then staggered breaks could be undertaken. However could this system be appropriately supervised?
Keeping the school open.	Further snow or ice, or icing of previous fall.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff, and pupils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Principal to monitor the weather conditions through the Met Office and local media. ❖ Information may also be gained from the Board. ❖ Further salt/grit could be used on walkways and other areas to minimise for the next day. ❖ Surface water could be brushed to drains to avoid icing up over night. ❖ Maintain walkways and key roadways. 	Further stock of salt/grit could be organised and/or maintenance undertaken on water or heating systems to ensure they continue to work effectively.

Communication to parents, Boards is vital.

b. Generic Risk Assessment – Severe weather - Ice/Snow

You may now consider the following activities to complete the risk assessment using the generic risk assessment and the guidance in the previous sections. The list is not exhaustive and can be added to when taking into account other school specific issues and activities.

c. Risk Assessment Template

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Hazard</i>	<i>Persons who may be at Risk</i>	<i>Controls in Place</i>	<i>Further Consideration for Implementation</i>
Travel/transport to/ from school				
Access within the school				
Supervision of activities				
Heating and Welfare Facilities				
Maintenance of school premises				

Step 4 – Key Websites and Contacts

NI Met Office				www.metoffice.gov.uk
NI Met Office				www.roadsni.gov.uk
NI Roads Service				www.niwater.com
NI Water				
Police Service for Northern Ireland			0845 600 8000	www.psni.police.uk
NI Fire and Rescue Service			Insert your local contact	www.nifrs.org
Education and Library Board	<u>Belfast</u>	Gerry McGuinness	gerrym@belb.co.uk Tel: 02890 564026	
	<u>Western</u>	Michelle McSwiggan	michelle.mcswiggan@welbni.org Tel: 02882 411411	
	<u>North Eastern</u>	Hilary Spence	Hilary.Spence@neelb.org.uk Tel: 02825 662296	
	<u>South Eastern</u>	Pat O'Connor	pat.oconnor@seelb.org.uk Tel: 02890 566200 Ext 6275	
	<u>Southern</u>	Brenda Brady	Brenda.brady@selb.org Tel: 02837 512200	

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Name of Contacts</i>	<i>Contact Details</i>	<i>Website</i>
Department of Education	Curriculum Support Team	curriculum.supportteam@deni.gov.uk Tel: 02891 279533	www.deni.gov.uk
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)	Alison Russell	Alison.Russell@ccmsschools.com Tel: 02890 393880	www.onlineccms.com
NI Rivers Agency			www.riversagency.cyni.gov.uk



Types of School Closure

Optional Days

Schools are required to be in operation for 200 days per year while full-time teachers are required to be available for work on 195 days. The difference between 200 and 195 are called Optional Days.

The 5 optional days may be taken as occasional closings during school terms, or as an extension to the Easter, Christmas or summer holiday periods, according to the circumstances of individual schools.

However, optional days are also intended to cover a school having to close during the year in special circumstances such as:

- ❖ the death of a person connected with the school (other than a teacher or pupil); or
- ❖ a planned specific event, for example, the need to move premises, the start of building work, a Church holiday etc.

Training Days (known as "Baker Days")

Of the 195 days that full-time teachers are required to be available for work, no more than 190 of these days should involve teaching children in a classroom situation. The remaining 5 "Baker" days are used for training purposes.

School Development Days (SDDs)

Schools may avail of School Development Days (SDDs) during the school year. SDDs provide additional non-contact time to devote to school improvement and school development matters. It is expected that SDDs will be used for school/staff development work taking place during the hours of the normal school day. The number of such days available to schools is notified by way of a separate DE Circular – the current Circular (2010/5) allows schools up to 5 SDDs each year for the period 2010/11 to 2014/15.

Depending on the number of SDDs schools avail of, they can therefore be in operation for pupils for between 185 and 190 each year.

Exceptional Closure Days

Exceptional Closures require approval from the Department of Education, to allow a school to reduce the number of days on which it is operational to below 200. Where the closure is foreseen or planned - for example, if a school is to be used as a polling station, or will be undergoing building work - schools will be able to apply for advance approval to close. However, where the closure is unforeseen - for example, in periods of extreme weather - such approval will be sought retrospectively.

If approval is given for Exceptional Closure a school's entitlement to Optional, Training ("Baker") and School Development Days is not affected.

Exceptional Closures will only be approved when the closing of a school is outside the control of the school authorities, for example, due to:

- ❖ the death of a teacher or pupil at the school;
- ❖ flooding or burst pipes;
- ❖ electricity failure;
- ❖ an exceptionally heavy snowfall; or
- ❖ use as a polling station for parliamentary/local government elections.

Do schools have to compensate for exceptional closures?

Schools do not have to make up days that have been approved for "exceptional" closure by the Department. However, individual schools may in consultation with staff make alternative arrangements to recover lost teaching time. For example, where schools have planned to take their full 5 School Development Days, they may cancel untaken days and open as normal to pupils instead.

Department of Education
Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgill
BANGOR
Co Down
BT19 7PR



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