

PLEASE QUOTE REF NUMBER ON ALL CORRESPONDENCE.

Our Ref: DES-CU-01797-2020

Dear Mr. Joyce,

Thank you for your recent letter to the Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Joe McHugh TD, outlining your concerns regarding Traveller children during this period of closure of schools as a result of COVID 19 pandemic.

While all students have been impacted by the closure of schools, the Minister is fully aware that certain students, including Traveller and ROMA children, may require more support to assist in their continuity of learning in order to ensure they do not disengage with the school system.

In order to bridge the gap between home and school and to provide meaningful support to those on the margins, the Department has initiated some measures including guidelines and supports. The Department has set up a Continuity of Learning Group and a series of guidance documents has been developed for schools. This guidance focuses on how schools can effectively support and engage with their students and address challenges in providing programmes of continued learning in the current context. The guidance notes includes advice on supporting pupils with special needs and children at risk of educational disadvantage, with specific reference to Traveller and ROMA children. Guidance documents can be accessed at <https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19#guidance>.)

All schools and teachers have been asked to communicate regularly and engage with students to ensure that there is continuity in their learning. Schools have been asked to continue to plan lessons and, where possible, provide resources for students or online lessons where schools are equipped to do so. Schools have also been asked to be conscious of students who may not have access to online facilities or technology and to adapt approaches to ensure that these pupils' ability to participate in learning is not compromised.

To support access to technology the Minister has announced €50m in ICT funding for schools. This includes €40m for the ICT annual grant to eligible schools which provides for schools to buy equipment for use by students and teachers in developing digital technology approaches to teaching and learning which schools can now re-prioritise where needed to support the continuity of teaching and learning for students. A further €10m in the form of top-up funding is being made available to all primary and post-primary schools to assist schools further in the purchase of devices for students and teachers to support continuity of learning during this period. €7million additional funding is provided for the post-primary sector and €3m for the primary sector. Schools have been asked to use this funding to address situations where students are disadvantaged in their engagement with the schools remote teaching and learning due to lack of access to digital devices. The devices will remain the property of the schools and loaned to the student to assist them in their studies.

With regard to supporting access to websites for students, the Department has liaised with the Department of Communications, Climate Change and Energy (DCCAE) to raise the issue of barriers to connectivity impacting access to remote learning. The Department is also working with DCYA and Tusla Education Support service to ensure that students and families from disadvantaged backgrounds are adequately supported during this time of school closure. This work includes working with Traveller children.

Yours sincerely,

Derek Newcombe
Private Secretary