

Subject:

Class Sizes in Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools

Circular Number:
2004/5

Date of Issue:
12 March 2004

Target Audience:

Education and Library Boards;
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education;
Comhairle na Gaelscolaiochta;
Principals and Boards of Governors of Grant-Aided Post-Primary Schools;
Teachers' Organisations

Summary of Contents:

This Circular sets out details of practical subjects and related class sizes.

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Governor Awareness:
Essential

Status of Contents:
Advice

Related Documents:

Superseded Documents:
Circular 2001/14
and DE letter of 19/12/2001

Expiry Date:
Not applicable

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CLASS SIZES IN PRACTICAL SUBJECTS

1. A recent analysis of data from schools has established that a significant number exceed the maximum level of pupils in practical subjects. Accordingly the Department has given further consideration to the issue of class sizes in practical subjects. This Circular provides up-to-date guidance and information for post-primary schools. It also explains the new monitoring arrangements which will be introduced in the 2004/05 school year in order to assess the position in individual schools.

STATUTORY RULE

2. The number of pupils under instruction by one teacher should not exceed 20 for a class in a practical subject, except where approved by the Department (ref Regulation 15 of the Secondary School (Grant Conditions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1973). In this context a practical subject includes **Science, Technology and Design, Home Economics, Art and Design, Physical Education and Music.**

3. The Standing Conference for Secondary Education has been considering for some time the issue of class sizes in practical subjects and is of the view that schools should be reminded of their responsibilities in this area under Health and Safety Legislation.

APPLICATION

4. A distinction must be drawn between classes in practical subjects which involve practical activities and those that do not. Where a class of pupils is under instruction in a practical subject and are not involved in practical activities, the Department is prepared to approve a class size in excess of 20. Where a class of pupils is under instruction in a practical subject and are involved in practical activities, the Department takes the view that, in general, the health and safety hazards are such that adequate and safe supervision of pupils is not possible if more than 20 pupils are present. Also, in practical classes with pupils with special educational needs, the number of pupils present should be fewer than 20. The specific number should reflect the additional support and supervision which are required in the class.

EXCEPTIONS (Applicable to Science, Art & Design and PE only)

5. The Department is prepared to approve a class size in excess of 20 in circumstances where the activities are unlikely to present any risk to the health and safety of the pupils in the class. It is the

responsibility of the school authorities to assess the health and safety risks of practical activities in the various practical subjects.

6. The Department is prepared to approve class sizes up to the maximum numbers as set out below:-

Practical Subject	Year	Max Number of Pupils
Science (<i>see Note 1</i>)	8-10	26
	11-12	24
	13-14	20
Art and Design (<i>see Note 1</i>)	8-10	26
	11-14	20
PE (<i>see Note 2</i>) Gymnasium and Assembly Halls	8-10	25
	11-14	20
	Playing Pitches and Sports Halls	30

Note 1: *Assumes that the class is conducted in a standard size laboratory/studio (at least 83 sq m). For laboratories/studios of less than the standard size the number of pupils who can be accommodated safely should be reduced in direct relation to the size (in square metres) of the accommodation. For example in a laboratory of 75 sq m in Years 11-12 the maximum number of pupils would be 22 in science classes. In the event that accommodation is available which is **larger** than the 83 sq m schools should note that class sizes must **not** exceed the specified maximum, ie 26 in Years 8-10 and in science only 24 in Years 11-12. For years 13-14 in science, approved class sizes remain at 20.*

Note 2: *Safe Practice in physical education, sport and outdoor adventure activities is not solely a matter of class size. The assessment of risk by teachers will be strongly influenced by the nature of the activity, pupils' age, maturity and needs, teachers' and pupils' competences in the activity and the safety of the environment in which the activity is taking place. For example, the safety of an assembly hall for some activities will change when a piano or chairs are stored in the corner or along one side of the hall. For outdoor adventure activities a much lower pupil:teacher ratio than 20:1 is necessary.*

DEPARTMENT'S APPROVAL

7. Schools may therefore assume the Department's approval to classes in excess of 20 pupils in respect of those subjects as set out in paragraph 6 only. It will not be necessary for schools to seek approval for individual classes in these subjects on an annual basis.

ADVICE

8. Schools might also wish to consider a more effective use of timetable strategies to reduce class sizes. For example, certain schools might be in a position to devise timetables whereby more practical subjects could be taught at the same times. More ‘double periods’ could also be introduced.

HEALTH AND SAFETY PLUS HUMAN RIGHTS LEGISLATION

9. Employing authorities and schools are reminded of their duties under the Health and Safety at Work Order (Northern Ireland) 1978 to ensure the health and safety of employees and other persons on the premises. Those in control of premises have a duty to ensure that the premises and any equipment or substance in the premises are safe and without risk to health.

10. There are serious health and safety implications arising from large classes in schools and compensation claims for any injury sustained by a pupil are more likely if practical class sizes exceed the recommended maximum.

11. While this circular sets out maximum approved limits for practical class sizes, schools should also have regard to the advice and guidance contained in the series of Safety Booklets and circulars issued by the Department. A list of these is attached at Annex A. Further advice is also available from the Health and Safety Executive, 83 Ladas Drive, Belfast BT6 9FR, or from its website: www.hseni.gov.uk and the GB website: www.hse.gov.uk

12. Schools should also be aware of pupils’ and teachers’ rights under the Human Rights Act 1998. A guide entitled ‘A Guide for School Management to the Human Rights Act 1998’ issued in October 2003 from the Department with a short guide for teachers that summarises key points of the Human Rights Act, these are available on the Department’s website at www.deni.gov.uk (see under Equality Rights and Social Inclusion icon then Human Rights icon).

MONITORING OF CLASS SIZES POSITION IN SCHOOLS

13. In view of the importance of these legislative provisions a mechanism will be put in place to encourage schools to adhere to the class sizes requirements. Accordingly, the Department’s District Inspectors will raise the issue on alternate years with each Principal as part of their discussion on the school’s development plan. A form will issue to the Principal to facilitate this process. The position

will then be assessed and monitored by DE administrative staff. Separately, Specialist Inspectors in the relevant practical subject areas will monitor class sizes in the context of the formal inspection programme or in the course of specialist visits. It is hoped that this arrangement will successfully address the problem of oversize practical classes in schools.

OTHER PRACTICAL SUBJECTS

14. The Department is aware that schools may provide non-compulsory courses of study which could be classified as practical subjects. Where this is the case, school authorities should have regard to the health and safety requirements and limit the number of pupils attending for practical work. It is not possible to list in this Circular all of those non-compulsory courses of study, which may be regarded as practical subjects and the class size limits which should apply to each. School authorities may take advice from the Department as necessary on what the class limits should be for other practical subjects.

15. This Circular supersedes Circular 2001/14 and the Department's letter of 19 December 2001 which temporarily removed the requirement that class sizes in music should be restricted to 20.

(* available on DE website at www.deni.gov.uk)

DENI Safety in Art and Design and CDT
DENI Safety Guidelines for Computer Studies
DENI Safety in Home Economics
DENI Safety in Home Economics in Primary Schools
DENI Safety in School Workshops
DENI Safety in Science Laboratories – *see note 1 below*
DENI Safety in The Use of Ionising Radiations in Educational Establishments
DENI Music - Safety and Hygiene Circular 1998

Health and Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits – A Good Practice Guide, DfES 1998
- also 3 part supplement to main guidance, published 2002
- Guidance on Group Safety at Water Margins, published 2003
- all available at the Department for Education and Skills website at www.dfes.gov.uk

Safety in Outdoor Education, DES 1989 – *see note 2 below*
Fireworks Safety
Safe Practice in Physical Education (BAALPE publication, 2000) – *see note 3 below*
- also Safe Practice in PE poster (BAALPE & DfES), issued 2003
Physical Education for Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Education (BAALPE 1994)

EU Food Hygiene Safety Campaign - Primary Schools
EU Food Hygiene Safety Campaign - Secondary Schools

*DENI Circular 1993/2 - Animals and Plants in Schools: Legal Aspects
*DENI Circular 1994/27 - Peanut Allergy: Laboratory Experiments
*DENI Circular 1996/16 - Misuse of Drugs – Guidance for Schools
*DENI Circular 1998/22 - Eyeball Dissection in Schools and Colleges
*DENI Circular 1988/29 - Detachable Pen Tops – Risks to Pupils

DENI Letter 22/6/1994 - Emergency Eyewash Bottles
DENI Letter 14/5/1997 - Educational Visits to Farms
DENI Letter 14/5/1997 - Care in the Sun Guidelines for Schools

Note 1: DENI Safety in Physical Education 1984 & DENI Safety in Physical Education in Primary Schools }- replaced by BAALPE publication 1999 } 'Safe Practice in Physical Education'

Note 2: Safety in Environmental Science, 1984 – incorporated into the 'Safety in Science Laboratories' booklet, Revised 1989

Note 3: DENI Safety in Outdoor Activities, 1984 – replaced by DES booklet 'Safety in Outdoor Education' (1989)