



**An Roinn Oideachais**  
Department of Education

# **A Review of the 2021 School – Based Summer Programme for Primary, Post-Primary and Special Schools**

**Inspectorate**

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# Chapter 1: The 2021 Summer Programme

## Background and Context

In May 2021, the Department of Education announced a package of supports to enable primary, post-primary and special schools across Ireland to offer summer programmes for students with complex special educational needs (SEN) and those at the greatest risk of educational disadvantage. These supports were provided in recognition of the periods of school closures in 2020 and 2021 and the challenges that remote teaching and learning posed for some of these students. The supports built upon the success of previous interventions such as the expanded *Summer Programme* of 2020 and the 2021 *Supplementary Programme*<sup>1</sup>.

Primary schools with special classes and special schools were encouraged to provide extended summer programmes compared to previous years. For the first time, in 2021, all mainstream primary schools were also invited to offer a new two or three week inclusion programme for their pupils with the greatest needs. All post-primary schools were invited to provide a *Summer Programme* in 2021 for students with complex special educational needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage. The expanded programme built on the success of the first post-primary *Summer Programme* which took place in 2020 in DEIS schools and incorporated feedback from education stakeholders as to how to better support the programme for 2021.

The Department provided a range of additional resources and supports to encourage as many schools as possible across all sectors to participate in the programme. These supports included grants, the appointment of an overseer, reduced administration requirements, flexibility in the timing of the programme, access to external staff, paid preparation time, funding for staffing, and earlier payment arrangements for staff. Guidance documents were issued to schools to assist with the administration of the programme and the Department also provided the schools with sector-specific guidance on the selection of students for the programme and key information on providing for teaching and learning. The guidance documents were augmented by webinars and a support helpline. A number of principals of schools that had successfully offered the 2020 *Summer Programme* contributed to communicating the value of the programme to their peers by webinar.

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<sup>1</sup> This programme for students with complex needs supplemented their education during the school closure through the provision of 5 hours per week in-person teaching or care support delivered in students' homes.

The guidance documents outlined the desired outcomes of the *Summer Programme* for learners. It was expected that students would:

- Maintain or experience an enhanced sense of connection with the school.
- Experience a better sense of their own wellbeing.
- Have increased confidence to continue with their education.

The general approaches outlined in the documents were intended to guide the provision of enjoyable learning experiences and realistic learning outcomes for children and young people over the relatively short duration of the programme. Schools were encouraged to engage with parents/guardians so that expectations about the nature of the child’s programme could be agreed in advance and that good communication could be maintained throughout the programme. To support continuity in the child’s learning, schools were asked to ensure that the outcomes of the programme for each should be shared effectively in written form with the school and the parents in a timely manner.

The flexibility and autonomy which was afforded to schools to design learning programmes appropriate to children’s needs and their particular educational setting were very significant. Schools could offer the programme at any time between early July and the end of the school holidays. In total, 625 schools within the primary sector operated a *Summer Programme* in 2021. This included special education focused programmes provided in 39 special schools and in 338 primary schools with special classes. 405 mainstream primary schools provided the inclusion version of the programme incorporating a focus on students with SEN or at risk special educational needs. At post-primary level, 99 schools provided the programme.

## Chapter 2: Review Methodology

### Background

The Department received very positive feedback regarding the operation of the 2020 *Summer Programme* from parents and school principals. Included in this feedback were various examples and suggestions which were very helpful to the Department in improving and extending the programme for 2021. The Inspectorate was requested to carry out in-depth research into the 2021 programme with a view to identifying best practice, suggesting improvements to future guidance documents and making recommendations for the future operation of the *Summer Programme*.

### The Research Process

As soon as the 2021 programme was announced, the Inspectorate formed a small working group to identify an appropriate methodology for the research. The group decided that the research should be carried out in all school sectors using the same methodology and that it would include evidence from inspectors' observations together with the views of school leaders, school staff, parents and, where possible, students. It was agreed that the research would be carried out in two phases as follows: phase 1 incorporating school visits during the operation of the programme in July/August 2021 and phase 2 involving a telephone survey of school leaders and an online parent survey in late January 2022. In this way, the research was designed to create commentary on the quality of provision during the programme and to identify any longer term or enduring benefits of the programme for students following their return to school for the first term of the new school year.

Phase 1 of the research incorporated visits to schools providing the programme and focused on collecting evidence related to the following questions:

- Which students were attending?
- What staff delivered the programme?
- How was the programme planned?
- What continuous professional development (CPD) or guidance was accessed?
- How was the programme delivered?
- What was the content of the programme?
- Were student and parent voices included in the programme?
- How was the programme reviewed and monitored?
- Were there any examples of excellent practice?
- Were there any recommendations for improvement?

A range of school types was visited. They included mainstream schools, special schools, Gaelscoileanna, Gaeltacht schools and some schools participating in Delivering Equality in Schools (DEIS). During school visits, inspectors were asked to observe a sample of the programme activities and to engage with the principal/overseer and staff in relation to the research themes. Inspectors visited ninety-one schools in total, including forty-six primary schools, twelve special schools and thirty three post-primary schools.

Phase 2 of the research commenced in mid-January 2022. A small subsample of the schools visited during the summer of 2021 was identified and the inspector who conducted the initial visit was asked to conduct a follow-up telephone interview with the principal/ overseer. For this phase, the following questions formed the basis of discussion:

- Did the Department’s guidance document provide sufficient support for you and your teachers?
- How would you describe the students’ engagement with the programme?
- What was the key area of focus during the programme?
- Did the programme achieve its objectives for students in your school and what is the evidence for this?
- How did you ensure that learning from the programme informed teachers’ planning for students on their return to school in September 2021?
- Did learning feed into the work of the student support team/care team?
- Are there any examples of the ongoing positive impact for student engagement / learning / attendance noted for the term September to December 2021?
- Are there things you would do differently if your school was to participate in the programme again?

At the end of the telephone interview, inspectors requested the schools to distribute a link to an online survey to the parents of all students who availed of the *Summer Programme* in their schools. The online survey invited parents to respond on a five point scale indicating their agreement or otherwise with the following statements:

- My child enjoyed attending the *Summer Programme*.
- The *Summer Programme* helped my child to remain connected with the school, the teachers and his/her friends.
- The school discussed my child’s learning plans for the *Summer Programme* with me.
- The *Summer Programme* helped my child to make up for at least some of the learning gaps caused by the school closures of 2020 and 2021.
- The *Summer Programme* promoted a sense of safety, calm and hope for my child.

- The *Summer Programme* helped my child to transition into the new school year.
- I was provided with a progress report at the end of the *Summer Programme*.
- Overall, I am satisfied with the progress my child made during the *Summer Programme*.

Two final open-ended questions invited parents to respond to the following:

1. Please tell us briefly what the *Summer Programme* did best for your child.
2. Please tell us briefly how the *Summer Programme* could be improved for your child.

In Phase 2, Inspectors conducted telephone interviews with eleven primary principals, ten principals of special schools and ten principals/overseers in post-primary schools. There were twenty-six responses to the online survey from parents whose child attended a mainstream primary school, thirty-nine relating to special classes and one hundred and ten responses for special schools. There were fifty-eight responses from parents whose children attended post-primary schools.

In the following chapters the evidence from phases 1 and 2 is presented and analysed separately for primary and post-primary schools and the resulting combined overall findings are set out in the final chapter.

Evaluative commentary on the quality of educational provision is presented in line with the Inspectorate’s five-point Quality Continuum. Where percentages are not presented in numeric form, they are represented by the qualitative terms explained in the following table:

<b>More than 90%</b>	<b>Almost all</b>
<b>75% – 90%</b>	<b>Most</b>
<b>51% – 74%</b>	<b>Majority / more than half</b>
<b>50%</b>	<b>Half</b>
<b>25% – 49%</b>	<b>Less than half / a significant minority</b>
<b>16% – 24%</b>	<b>A small number / less than a quarter</b>
<b>Less than 15%</b>	<b>A few</b>



## Chapter 3: How the 2021 Summer Programme worked in Primary and Special Schools

### Introduction

This chapter presents the combined evidence collected by primary inspectors during their visits to a sample of fifty-eight of the schools providing the 2021 *Summer Programme*. The evidence being presented reflects findings from the following versions of the programme:

- A school-based *Summer Programme* for all special schools (with the same staffing ratios which apply during term time).
- A school-based *Summer Programme* for students attending special classes in mainstream primary schools (with the same staffing ratios which apply during term time).
- A school-based inclusion *Summer Programme* available to all mainstream primary schools for children and young people with complex needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage (with a staffing ratio of one teacher and one SNA per group of up to twelve children).

### Phase 1: The school research visits

#### Theme 1: The Pupils/ Students Attending

The number of pupils/students attending the Summer Programme in individual schools varied by school type, the version of the programme offered and the availability of staff to run the programme. In the majority of special schools visited, the programme was offered to all students, while a minority offered the programme only to students with particular diagnoses. In mainstream schools with special classes, the programme was generally offered to all of the students in the special classes, with any vacant places then offered to students with complex needs from the mainstream classes.

In special classes and special schools, inspectors noted that the programme ratios operated according to the guidelines. For the inclusion programme, mainstream schools were required to prioritise their limited places for the students with the greatest levels of need according to the criteria outlined by the Department in its guidance documents. Inspectors reported that this process of prioritisation was typically carried out by principals, the in-school leadership and SEN teams, and where appropriate, the home-school community liaison coordinator (HSCL). Some mainstream schools offered unused places on their programmes to students from neighbouring schools or to students transitioning into the school. While most schools reported that the system for prioritising places on the inclusion programme worked well, a small number of schools

found it difficult to establish transparent criteria for educational disadvantage that didn't label families unfairly. A small number of mainstream schools operated the inclusion programme without the full group of twelve students, citing either the complexity of needs in the group or the poor uptake of places by some students with significant needs. Across all versions of the programme, inspectors noted that attendance levels were generally very good and that very few additional interventions were required to encourage attendance.

## **Theme 2: The Staff Involved**

Almost all of the special schools and mainstream schools with special classes had previous experience of running a *Summer Programme* or July provision. In the small number of such settings where the programme was running for the first time, some principals and staff said that they offered the programme out of their concern for effects that the COVID restrictions had on their students. A few teachers stated that their experience of working with families during the supplementary programme in Spring 2021 highlighted this concern and encouraged them to volunteer for the *Summer Programme*. As the mainstream inclusion programme was new for 2021, most mainstream schools had no previous experience of a *Summer Programme* unless they had a special class. For many mainstream schools, the decision to provide the inclusion programme was also influenced by staff awareness of behavioral, wellbeing and learning needs exacerbated during periods of school closures.

Across all versions, most programmes were led by the principal, senior leadership and members of the special education team and the programme was usually delivered by the school's own teachers and SNAs. Other key staff such as nurses and therapists supported the programme in some of the special schools. Inspectors noted that in almost all settings, the roles of staff complied with Department guidance. It was generally accepted that the programme worked best where teachers and SNAs were previously familiar with the students. Some schools reported difficulty in recruiting their own staff for the programme, with some existing staff reporting exhaustion at the end of two difficult school years. In these cases, external staff were recruited for the programme. There were some examples of very good practice whereby new staff (internal or external) were introduced to students and briefed about their needs through handover sessions before the end of the regular school term so that students would be familiar with them before the *Summer Programme* commenced.

## **Theme 3: Planning the Programme**

Across the variety of school settings visited, there was evidence of good collaboration between school leaders, class teachers and the special education team in planning for the programme. In the most effective planning, schools consulted with parents and also included the student voice. In the majority of settings, information from the student's support file also contributed to the planning of the programme, as advised by the Department's guidance.

In special classes and special schools, the content of the programme frequently highlighted wellbeing, structure, socialisation and the generalisation of previously mastered learning. One principal from a special school hoped that the programme would provide “an experience for the children that has a significantly relaxed feel with less curriculum demands and more community-based and nature-based learning experiences.”

In the mainstream schools, the inclusion programme needed to serve a range of learning needs across many age groups. One principal’s description of the programme typifies the approach taken by many schools:

“The school is committed to bridging the gap in students’ learning resulting from the lockdown. We want to provide an enjoyable enriching programme of work which will engage the students and draw on their strengths. It is hoped that peer-to-peer relationships will be strengthened and that the positive interactions with school staff will support the development of the bonds of trust.”

#### **Theme 4: Continuous Professional Development**

The Department supported schools to operate the *Summer Programme* by providing guidance documents and a webinar. Most school staff reported that they were aware of this guidance and had found it clear and useful as they prepared for the programme. Webinars were strongly welcomed as they allowed staff to access guidance at a time and pace which suited them. One principal, who found the guidance particularly useful, stated that the staff were “delighted with the ‘breathing space’ and ‘autonomy’ that was given to schools around the design of the programme and that they got some good ideas from the guidance materials.” This was echoed by another principal who felt that the autonomy, combined with the school’s prior knowledge of the students and their needs enabled them to tailor the programme very effectively for students. However, there were a small number of principals and teachers who were unaware of the publication of any guidance documents. Another small group felt that the guidance was too general in nature and wasn’t prescriptive enough. Some of these teachers felt that it was confusing to have all of the guidance for different versions of the programme in a single document.

When asked to suggest improvements to the current guidance, a significant minority pointed to the late announcement of the programme and provision of guidance. Some suggested that the scale and nature of future summer programmes should be announced around Easter. It was also suggested that some examples of best practice from 2021 and that some planning and reporting templates should be appended to future guidance documents.

#### **Theme 5: Delivery of The Summer Programme**

Inspectors were asked to give their views on how well the programme was operating based on their own observations and from discussions with staff. Across all types of

schools and settings, inspectors reported that the programme was running very well and that in almost all cases, it was being delivered in a manner consistent with the guidelines. In particular, they noted that most programmes included a very wide variety of enjoyable activities and that students were engaged enthusiastically in their learning. Activities were generally based on students' interests and often included a focus on social and life skills, sensory issues, wellbeing, use of the outside environment, trips and use of concrete learning materials. In most cases, timetables were structured to provide a flexible approach and an appropriate blend of activities and breaks. Many teachers used a thematic approach to link aspects of learning such as literacy, numeracy, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), STEM and Visual Arts. In one case, a child who rarely spoke in school during regular term time was reported to be thriving in the more relaxed learning environment and contributing more regularly to classroom conversations. Inspectors noted that most teachers were reviewing the programme on a daily or weekly basis and adapting their approach to incorporate student choices and to reflect parental feedback.

#### **Theme 6: Content of The Summer Programme**

The content of the programme varied slightly according to the type of school setting. In special classes and special schools, most programmes were generally focused on priority learning needs and targets from the student support plan. These programmes usually addressed language and communication, social and emotional skills, motor skills, self-regulation, routines, transitions and life skills together with some aspects of literacy and numeracy. Inspectors noted the frequent use of choice boards, visual timetables, picture exchange communication systems (PECS), apps and digital resources.

Inclusion programmes in mainstream schools generally focused on areas such as oral language, literacy, numeracy, Science, Physical Education, SPHE, play-based learning and wellbeing. Inspectors noted the use of yoga, meditation and mindfulness activities to help students to relax and self-regulate. One student who was learning to regulate observed that "I'm OK with losing, I recognize when I need a break and I know that I need to make good choices." Most programmes included a focus on developing digital skills through use of tablets, apps, and the interactive whiteboard.

In a few programmes, digital skills were extended though coding and robotics. In one school, students made their own film and contributed to a digital EZINE. Some programmes included a deliberate focus on supporting students transitioning into the school or preparing for post-primary school. One school made particularly good use of information from the "Mo Scéal Féin" transition document provided by a local pre-school.

#### **Theme 7: Pupil/Student Voice**

While the views of pupils/students often influenced the content and delivery of the programmes, very few schools had a formal mechanism to collect students' views. Some schools sought students' views during reviews of the student support plan or during planning for the *Summer Programme*. A small number of schools conducted a

student survey before the programme commenced and this was very useful for programme planning. This is very good practice and should be adopted by all schools, where practicable, for future programmes. Notwithstanding the lack of formal consultation with students, it was very evident that teachers across all settings regularly included the student view informally during the programme through the use of choice boards, discussion about preferred activities and personal preferences and general feedback from students.

### **Theme 8: Parental Voice**

In discussions with inspectors, the majority of principals indicated that they had taken parents' views on board when planning their *Summer Programmes*. In some cases, these views were collected formally through the student support plan review meetings or parent surveys. A significant minority of principals had planned their programmes without formally seeking parental views. However, many schools were enabling more informal feedback from parents during the programme through, for example, communication diaries, digital platforms, apps or social media.

### **Theme 9: Review and Monitoring**

During the school visits, principals were asked to reflect upon the operation of the programme in their schools and to provide suggestions about what the school or the Department could do to improve the programme for future years. Many principals in special schools and schools with special classes argued that the programme should be announced earlier in the school year and be more attractive for existing school staff to volunteer in sufficient numbers. They viewed existing staff as being essential for providing continuity of education and care. Some special school principals reflected their own plans to extend their programmes in future years with more emphasis on fun, life skills and work in the community. Many principals outlined benefits of the 2021 programme for their students including improved social, functional and life skills, self-regulation and better relationships with staff. Some students engaged well with new experiences during the programme, including one student who visited the beach for the first time and another student who overcame a fear of playing with friends on a bouncing castle.

Most principals welcomed the mainstream inclusion programme and found the guidance helpful in identifying pupils and providing structure to the programme. Many agreed that the programme worked best when it was delivered by staff familiar with the pupils. Most principals viewed their own programmes as being very successful, citing examples of better engagement, relaxed learning environments, reduced pupilisolation and inclusion of students who had been "falling through the cracks". A few principals argued that, depending on the needs of students selected, it could be difficult to run a mixed-age programme with a teacher/pupil ratio of 12:1. There were also some suggestions about reducing the overall duration of the programme or the length of the programme day and also about liaising with local community groups in future years to ensure that the timing of the programme did not clash with local fun camps. Some principals intended to liaise more with parents at the programme planning stage and a small number indicated that

they intended to schedule future programmes to August so that it would make a better contribution to student transitions.

## Exemplary Practice

Inspectors noted many aspects of exemplary practice across all versions of the programme. In special schools and special classes, there were examples of outdoor spaces being used very effectively to encourage safe interactions. In the absence of trips to external venues due to COVID-19 restrictions, some schools arranged visits to the school by attractions such as bouncing castles and a mobile farm. There were also examples of schools working on occupational therapy and speech and language targets, using social stories, exploring sensory activities and using circle time methodology very effectively. In one special school, a student who had previously been too anxious to venture outside the school premises was enabled to go for short walks outside the school gate with his teacher. This success was attributed to an ongoing positive relationship with the teacher and SNA and their consistent daily approaches to develop the student's confidence.

In another example where a student was successfully encouraged to travel on a class trip to a farm through the use of a social story, the principal noted that the "flexibility of the programme allowed teachers to give a student, who is anxious, some space to regulate. They can use "wait time" very effectively because they are not under the same time pressures to do curricular work as during the regular academic year."

Inspectors noted similar effective practices for the mainstream inclusion programmes. Many schools used a thematic approach to the programme and were able to relate key aspects of numeracy and literacy to a variety of fun activities. One school linked nurture activities to its programme while another adapted aspects of the Junior Entrepreneur Programme so that pupils could use a wide variety of academic, collaborative and creative skills to bake and sell cupcakes.

Elsewhere, pupils engaged in an open-ended cooperative/collaborative task to design and build a shoe that had to be "fashionable, comfortable, and waterproof." The inspector commented that the lesson observed was "a superb example of students developing interdependence within assigned groups. They were combining each other's intellectual and practical skills and knowledge to build the prototype."

Another inspector commended a school on its success in "attracting all but one of its 'targeted' children to the programme. The programme delivery was very much aligned to the needs of its students and to the requirements of the programme. A collaborative approach on the part of all involved enhanced delivery. Of particular note was the element of consultation with parents which supported the successful delivery of a meaningful programme for all students involved." Other schools were praised for their



planning in advance of the programme and for the manner in which they were recording students' engagement and progress.

## Examples Of Practice That was less effective

While the school visits were not primarily evaluative, inspectors noted a small number of aspects where the programme could be improved at school level. In a small number of special classes and schools, inspectors made recommendations about the need for all staff to read and follow the guidance, view the webinars and to monitor progress more effectively. There were also a few recommendations about supporting communication with students more effectively through more differentiated approaches, and use of Lámh and visual prompting. In one school, overseer and staff changes over the duration of the programme were noted as a possible barrier to continuity.

A small number of recommendations for mainstream inclusion programmes encouraged more use of play-based methodologies, better incorporation of the parent and student voices, and greater focus on literacy, numeracy, digital or life skills. In a few cases it was recommended that the programme should have a much clearer focus on supporting transitions for incoming students or those leaving the school.

## Scenarios/vignettes of good practice

Inspectors gathered the following vignettes to demonstrate some of the effective practice they noted during the school visits. Each scenario in the following sample is identified with the type of setting where it was observed:

### Special Schools

#### Special School A

The principal had developed a very easy and attractive template for teachers and SNAs to complete daily. It was called "Guess what I got up to today" with a list of items (for example, I ate well. I might be hungry later) and a separate section then for the SNA to complete. In this way, students' achievements and any care issues were shared effectively and communication with parents was ensured.

#### Special School B

In this example, the school had arranged a visit from a mobile farm. All students were brought out to experience the visit from the mobile farm and the staff went out of their way to ensure that all of the students got a chance to become involved. In some instances, this involved wheeling beds for students with very complex health needs out to the mobile farm truck. They got to hear, to see and to touch some of the animals, and the staff did everything to make the experience as positive as possible for the students, regardless of their challenging needs and disabilities. It was obvious that the students really enjoyed and benefited from this experience.

## Special Classes

### Special Class A

The school had organised a bouncing castle for use during the *Summer Programme*. One student was scared of bouncing castles and would not use it. Another pupil took on a leadership role and worked with his fellow pupil and encouraged him until he used the bouncing castle. The pupil was happy to use the bouncing castle for the remainder of the programme. The principal cited this as a great achievement for the pupil with the fear and also for the leadership of his peer mentor.

### Special Class B

During the visit, the inspector observed the activity of making and baking pizzas with the students. This activity was used very effectively as the basis for developing a wide range of skills including language development, team building, problem-solving and literacy and numeracy development. At all stages of the activity, tasks were differentiated effectively for students. The students were supported individually and collectively throughout the process by the teacher and the SNAs. In the initial stage of the activity students had to engage in selecting ingredients for making the pizza and to estimate the cost of the particular ingredient they were tasked with buying.

The recipe for making the pizza was also linked to the development of their procedural writing skills. The recipe was drafted by students using either pictures or text and added to the students' recipe book which they had developed over the duration of the programme. The next stage of the process involved a trip to the local shop. Here the students were tasked with buying their particular ingredient, paying for the item and getting their change. Each pupil had to make their own pizza using the ingredients provided. The numerical skills of measuring and estimating were a key focus during this process. The final stage was the shared enjoyment for the students of eating the pizzas and chatting with their friends and the staff on the *Summer Programme*.

## Mainstream Primary School Inclusion Programmes

### School A

Some pupils attending the programme in this school engaged with robotics and coding. One pupil demonstrated his learning by describing the processes involved, knowledge gained and applied, and demonstrated skills developed during an activity which was aligned very appropriately with his skills and ability. The skills demonstrated encapsulated critical thinking, problem-solving and collaboration where he designed, constructed and programmed Lego-based robotics to perform a series of tasks. He attained a level of mastery in coding that was highly commendable.



### **School B**

The school has access to a local forest. The group walked to the forest for one of the observed sessions. A tarpaulin was laid on the forest floor to create a lunch area. Red ribbons had been tied on low tree branches to indicate the boundary of the area to be remained within. There was a very good sense of calm and safety in this zone. One of the pupils read a tree-themed story to the group and there was a discussion following the reading. The pupils continued to build a “den” which they had started in their previous visits. They used only fallen material and respected the forest growth in this process. The group played a simple game of “hide and seek”, hiding behind trees in the ribbon-marked zone. Later there was choice of activities, with one group engaging in imaginative creative play, while another created “forest patterns” on the ground e.g. stone, twig, leaf, stone, twig, leaf. A clear sense of social connectedness was apparent in the group as they ate, worked and played together.

## **Phase Two: Views about the longer-term impact of Summer Programme 2021**

This section summarises principals’ responses about their retrospective views on the effectiveness of their 2021 *Summer Programme* as collected during telephone interviews in January 2022.

Looking back at their completed programmes, most principals described the Department’s guidance documents as very helpful and useful. Most also welcomed the flexibility and autonomy the documents afforded and they were happy with the fun and activity themes suggested. Some principals from special schools and schools with special classes said that while they had long experience of managing July Provision, the 2021 guidance allowed them to operate the programme with greater flexibility and to meet individual needs. A small number of principals expressed disappointment that they found the guidance documents to be somewhat vague and that they did not provide sufficient direction for schools on record keeping, assessment, monitoring and communication of outcomes to parents/carers and to the students’ teachers for the new term. Many principals urged the Department to issue details and guidance for the *Summer Programme* much earlier in the school year to allay parents’ anxiety and to enable schools to recruit staff and plan the programme in a timelier manner.

Almost all principals described very high levels of student engagement and attendance for the duration of the programme. They described how students enjoyed the more relaxed school atmosphere and engaged enthusiastically in a wide variety of tasks. While COVID-19 safety measures restricted some interactions and other activities, most schools managed to provide sufficient variety in their programme to keep their students engaged. Principals reported that they or the overseer monitored attendance very

carefully and followed up on absences. Principals in a few schools indicated that a very small number of older students had attended less consistently despite their monitoring.

Across all settings, principals described their programme's emphasis on aspects of social development, wellbeing, functional and life skills, literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Most programmes were designed to provide routine, structure and support for educational transitions. Almost all principals indicated that the focus of the programme was centred on students' strengths, needs and interests with a view to continuity of learning. In many cases, the content of the programme was informed by existing support plans and consultations with the parents and students.

Most principals reported that their programme achieved, or in a few cases, surpassed its objectives. Many described how learning routines were re-established in a less formal school atmosphere and how students enjoyed the programme and experienced personal success. While many schools used the targets in support plans to monitor progress for individual students, most schools relied on teacher observation and less formal approaches to assess the effects of the programme. Many principals also recounted very positive feedback from students, parents and school staff as evidence that their programme was successful.

When asked how they ensured that learning from the programme informed teachers' planning for students on their return to school in September, principals' responses were very varied. In some cases, teachers providing the programme were the students' class teachers or special education teachers and this arrangement provided for good continuity. In many cases, the school had arrangements in place for a written record of the programme's activities and achievements to be provided to the class teacher as a handover document. This type of document was viewed as very helpful for establishing new targets for students. In a very small number of cases, principals expressed their disappointment that some external teaching staff recruited for the programme had not provided satisfactory progress records for the school.

The extent to which learning from the programme fed into the work of the student support team was difficult to gauge. Where SNAs were from the school itself and previously familiar with the students, principals reported that this knowledge of the students contributed to the success of the programme and to continuity of care in the new school term. However, in some cases, principals indicated that communication about care and support issues was much more informal and varied.

When asked to identify any examples of the ongoing positive impact for student engagement, learning or attendance noted for the new school term, principals provided many examples but stressed that these were anecdotal observations rather than empirical research. Where positive long-term impacts were noted, these usually referred to better attendance, engagement or improved skills. One school reported "particularly noticeable gains for mainstream students especially in regard to reduced anxiety". In this

case these gains were said to be largely attributable to pupils having their school routines re-established and their positive experience of the school during the Summer Programme. Another example described how a student who had previously been very silent in class became very vocal during the *Summer Programme* and has continued to contribute vocally to lessons in the new school term.

A principal described how the overseer had established a friendship group during the programme for a student with a very poor attendance record and that this student's attendance has improved dramatically since then. Another principal described how involvement with the mainstream inclusion programme provided staff with new insights into students' needs and how this had a longer term positive impact: "Prior to the *Summer Programme* staff were not aware of the extent of some of the deficits in life-skills and social skills of some of the children. The inclusion programme gave an opportunity to observe these children and their experiences first hand and this has led to the inclusion of more life skills and social skills' learning targets in student support plans.' Teachers reported anecdotally that students were more positively disposed to school arising from their positive experience during the *Summer Programme*.

Principals were asked if there were things they would do differently if their school was to participate in the programme again. Some principals hoped to expand their programme and offer it to more students. Many indicated that they would improve their engagement with parents while planning the programme to ensure that targets were identified as accurately as possible. Almost all principals indicated that they would offer the programme again in 2022 but they expressed a strong wish for the Department to announce the programme earlier in the school year to enable advance preparations at school level. Some schools requested that administrative documentation be simplified and that school transport arrangements be finalised in a timely manner, well in advance of the programme's commencement. A small number of principals wished for more guidance on programme planning, assessment and recording and communication of students' progress. Many principals stressed the importance of incentivising their own teachers and SNAs to deliver the programme as a means of maximizing continuity for students. These principals cited inequality in the provision of extra personal vacation (EPV) days for staff, delayed payment from the Department and staff exhaustion as barriers to staff volunteering for the programme.

## Views of parents/guardians

During Phase 2 of the research in January 2022, parents whose children who attended the *Summer Programme* in the sample of twenty-one schools were invited to partake in an anonymous online survey about their child's experience of the programme. In total, 175 parents responded, including 110 parents whose children attended the programme in special schools, 39 whose children attended a special class and 26 whose children attended the mainstream inclusion programme. In almost all cases, their children attended the programme in their own schools. The majority of children attended the

programme for two weeks, with almost one quarter attending for four weeks and a few attending for either one or three weeks.

Almost all parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child enjoyed attending the *Summer Programme* and many provided positive comments such as “My son loves his Summer Programme. He doesn’t take part in any out of school activities or sports camps during the summer and this is a life saver for us all. He talks about it all the time throughout the year”. Almost all parents agreed or strongly agreed that the programme helped their child to remain connected with the school, the teachers and friends. One parent noted that it “helped my child to socialise with other children. Now his words are improved by attending this *Summer Programme* and his confidence increased and he became more motivated.”

The guidelines encouraged schools to communicate with parents about the content of the programme and to set targets for each child. The majority of parents agreed or strongly agreed that the school discussed their child’s learning plans for the *Summer Programme* with them but a significant minority were not aware of these discussions taking place. In their comments, a small number of parents expressed a wish for more focus on specific aspects of literacy, numeracy or life skills for their child during the programme. Most parents agreed or strongly agreed that the programme helped their child to make up for at least some of the learning gaps caused by the school closures of 2020 and 2021. Among numerous positive comments, one parent said that “it helped her with areas she was having difficulty with in reading and mathematics. I noticed a big improvement since the end of September and I think that it was these two weeks that helped. She really enjoyed going in.”

The guidance for the *Summer Programme* encouraged a focus on student wellbeing. Almost all parents agreed or strongly agreed that the programme promoted a sense of safety, calm and hope for their child. These aspects were reflected in the majority of written comments, outlining the benefits of the programme. The comments also contained numerous references to structure, stability, routine, safety, playful learning and a wide variety of activities. Schools were also asked to use the programme to support students who might find significant transitions to new educational settings difficult. Most parents agreed or strongly agreed that the programme provided this support for their child. Many parents made positive comments on this aspect, including one comment about the *Summer Programme* helping a child return to school successfully following a prolonged absence.

To promote continuity in each student’s learning journey, teachers were asked to provide a written progress report to parents in a timely manner at the end of the programme. While just over half of the parents who responded to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that this report had been provided for them, parents who did not receive progress reports did not make any negative comments in this regard. Notwithstanding this, Department guidance for future years should re-emphasise the value of providing

progress reports to parents, but also their importance for teachers in addressing these students' needs in the new school term.

Parents were asked to briefly outline in a short paragraph what the *Summer Programme* did best for their child. Responses identified a wide range of benefits provided by the programme. Many parents provided very personal accounts of how their child engaged with the programme and the progress achieved. Almost all of the responses expressed gratitude for the programme, the care and educational supports provided by teachers and SNAs. Responses praised the routines, the variety of activities, the focus on social and life skills and wellbeing. Many of the various positive comments are exemplified in this response from one parent who stated “The *Summer Programme* is vital for my child. He benefits from the routine and loves the programme – interacting with his friends and teachers. It is beneficial for his education and helps support him for the new term.”

Parents were also invited to provide suggestions for how the *Summer Programme* could be improved for their children. Some parents responded by simply praising their schools and the programme. However, many parents felt that the biggest single improvement to the programme would be an extension beyond two weeks and the involvement of more schools and staff to facilitate this. A small number of parents expressed a wish for additional in-school supports from therapists and nursing staff. There were some reservations about the effect of COVID-19 restrictions in limiting educational outings and interactions between groups. A small number of parents expressed a strong preference for the programme to be delivered by staff who are familiar with their children. Some parents were very anxious to ensure that future *Summer Programmes* would be announced much earlier in the year to provide certainty and to enable them plan their own summers.

## Key research findings

Planning the programme:

- Most school staff reported that they were aware of the Department’s guidance and had found it clear and useful as they prepared for the programme. The flexibility and autonomy provided in the guidance was welcomed by most schools.
- A small number of principals would like future guidance documents to provide greater clarity for schools on programme planning, assessment and recording of progress.
- Most programmes were led by the principal, senior leadership and members of the special education team and the programme was usually delivered by the school’s own teachers and SNAs.
- There was evidence of good collaboration between school leaders, class teachers and the special education team in planning for the programme.

- While the views of students often influenced the content and delivery of the programmes, very few schools had a formal mechanism to collect students' views.
- While the majority of principals indicated that they had taken parents' views on board when planning their *Summer Programmes*, a significant minority of principals had planned their programmes without formally seeking parental views.

#### Operating the programme:

- Across all iterations of the programme, inspectors noted that attendance levels were generally very good and that very few additional interventions were required to encourage attendance.
- Inspectors noted many aspects of exemplary practice across all versions of the programme.
- Across all types of schools and settings, inspectors reported that the programme was running very well and that in almost all cases, it was being delivered in a manner consistent with the guidelines. In particular, they noted that most programmes included a very wide variety of enjoyable activities and that students were engaged enthusiastically in their learning.

#### The views of parents:

- Almost all parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child enjoyed attending the *Summer Programme*.
- The majority of parents agreed or strongly agreed that the school discussed their child's learning plans for the *Summer Programme* with them but a significant minority were not aware of these discussions taking place.
- While just over half of the parents who responded to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that this report had been provided for them, parents who did not receive progress reports did not make any negative comments in this regard.
- Many parents felt that the biggest single future improvement to the programme would be an extension beyond two weeks and the involvement of more schools and staff to facilitate this.

#### Long term Impact:

- Where positive long-term impacts were noted, these usually referred to better attendance, engagement or improved skills.

#### Principals' views

- Almost all principals indicated that they would offer the programme again in 2022 but they expressed a strong wish for the Department to announce the

programme earlier in the school year to enable advance preparations at school level.

Many principals stressed the importance of incentivising their own teachers and SNAs to deliver the programme as a means of maximising continuity for students. These principals cited inequality in the provision of extra personal vacation (EPV) days for staff, delayed payment from the Department and staff exhaustion as barriers to staff volunteering for the programme.

## Recommendations for the Primary and Special School Summer Programmes

- The Department should finalise and publish its plans and guidance for the 2022 *Summer Programme* for primary and special schools before the end of April to enable school-level planning and staff recruitment to be completed in a timely manner.
- Guidance documents and webinars to support teaching and learning should continue to emphasise flexibility and school autonomy but they should also provide examples of operational planning and reporting templates for schools which require support on these matters.
- Arrangements for school transport should be finalised at least two weeks before the regular school term ends.
- The Department should examine further incentives for school staff to volunteer for the *Summer Programme*, including more prompt remuneration.
- Principals from schools which successfully delivered the 2021 programme should be enlisted to encourage an improved uptake of the 2022 programme by schools.
- Exemplars of good practice from the 2021 programme should be included in future guidance documents.
- All schools participating in the 2022 programme should implement measures to formally include the parent and student voice in programme planning.
- Schools should provide the parents of all students attending a *Summer Programme* with a written progress report when the programme ends.



## Chapter 4: How the 2021 Summer Programme worked in Post-Primary Schools

### Introduction

This chapter presents evidence drawn from the visits conducted by post-primary inspectors during their visits to a sample of thirty-three schools which provided the Summer Programme in 2021. In total ninety-nine schools ran provided the programme and 33 schools were visited by inspectors as part of this research.

### The school research visits

#### Theme 1: The Students Attending

In post-primary schools, students attending the Summer Programme were drawn predominantly from junior cycle classes. In some cases, schools offered the programme to pupils in sixth class who were due to start in first year in August 2021, with a view to supporting their transitions from primary to post-primary school. In a few schools, students from senior cycle classes also participated in the programme. Notably in one school, senior cycle students who participated in the summer programme in 2020 were invited back as mentors to the students in 2021. This had very positive impact on the students attending the programme. This is excellent practice and schools should consider implementing this practice in future programmes.

Post-primary schools used a comprehensive and wide range of student data to prioritise students who would benefit most from the summer programme. The data usually included information on students pertaining to: the SEN register, the continuum of support, attendance, and the lack of engagement in emergency remote provision of teaching and learning. Typically, schools considered a range of other issues which had impacted students' full participation in learning such as: anxiety, mental health challenges, learning difficulties, and backgrounds impacted by socio-economic and educational marginalisation. A few schools took the impact of bullying and difficulties arising from students' sexual orientation into consideration when selecting students for the programme.

In schools which have special classes, the students attending those classes were always prioritised for inclusion in the programme. Schools which offered the Level 2 Learning Programme (LPL2) prioritised the students following this programme for inclusion in their summer programme. In one school, students who lived in a Direct Provision centre were invited to attend the programme. In a few schools, students for whom English is an additional language (EAL) were prioritised for the programme. This was in recognition of the fact that school closures impacted significantly on students who had very little access to the language of schooling at that time.



In all schools, a combination of key personnel was involved in the selection of students for participation in the summer programme. This collaborative approach worked very well to ensure the students who would benefit most were selected. The special educational needs' co-ordinator (SENCO), Guidance Counsellor, and overseer worked together with Year Heads, Special Class teachers and senior management to draw up lists of priority students. In DEIS schools, additional data informed the selection of students such as information gathered by the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teacher in relation to parental engagement and family background challenges. Personnel from the School Completion Programme (SCP) also provided important data that schools used to select students.

Once schools had used their data systematically to develop lists of priority students up to the maximum of 10% of the student cohort, invitations were sent to parents and students. Typically, more places were offered than were availed of. The main reason given was the timing of the programme was not suitable, as families had made other arrangements. As the programme was only announced by the Department in May 2021, it was not possible for some schools to give adequate notice of their intention to run the programme, and this was cited as a key factor that reduced the uptake among students.

Student attendance across programmes was, overall, good. School personnel made huge efforts to encourage good attendance of students. This was done mainly by contacting parents directly through telephone, text message or email. Excellent practice was noted in one school which translated all correspondence into the parents' home languages using readily available technology. This ensured successful communication between the school and parents who speak languages other than English. Good communication with parents proved to have a very positive impact on student attendance.

When inspectors visited a selection of schools, they found most participants present on the day of the visit. The public health crisis impacted attendance in a few programmes considerably, and this was unavoidable. Incentives such as trips, barbeques and activity-based learning were all reported as impacting very positively on attendance. A flexible approach on the part of schools facilitated the participation of some students who could not attend every day due to family commitments such as caring for a younger sibling. This flexible approach and understanding of students individual circumstances is very commendable. In a few instances where there was a drop off in attendance, it was reported more among senior cycle students.

There was a strong correlation between very good planning, programme content, modes of delivery and participation and attendance. The stronger the link with making the programme content enjoyable and relevant to students' interests and lives the better the reported attendance. One school reported that they encouraged attendance by using students' interest in farming and quad-bikes as a basis for some of the content of the programme. Across many programmes, active learning through activities such as

cookery, baking, gardening and woodwork proved to be highly effective in promoting student enjoyment and participation.

### **Theme 2: The Staff Involved**

Staff involved in the programmes across all schools brought a variety of skills and expertise to their work. The guidance framework document for the programme was flexible enough to ensure that the expertise of teachers of any subject specialism could be utilised. Almost all schools ensured a good mixture of subject expertise among the teachers delivering the programme. Typically teachers of English, Mathematics, PE, Home Economics, Art, Business, or ICT were involved in delivering the summer programme.

In many schools, teachers with SEN expertise or special class teachers volunteered to teach in the programme. A few schools had teachers of technology, music, drama, sign language and wellbeing also involved. SNAs played a very important role in supporting the programme and brought very valuable skills and experience to bear on students' learning and participation.

Roles and responsibilities were generally very well adhered to and the overseer in all schools took on a considerable workload in ensuring all aspects of the programme ran smoothly. In a few cases the overseer had to teach on the programme due to staff shortages.

A minority of schools reported that they had very few volunteers from the teaching staff, and this was because the programme was announced too late. Management in these schools noted also that teachers were reluctant to volunteer due to the impact of the public health crisis.

### **Theme 3: Planning the Programme**

All schools had very similar aims for their Summer Programme. These aims were informed by the most pressing needs of their students and pertained particularly to supporting students' emotional, social, physical and academic wellbeing, as opposed to exclusively recovering learning loss. This aligns very much with the content and spirit of the guidance provided to schools.

Overseers and teachers identified the need to provide priority students with opportunities to maintain connections with the school, with teachers and with peers. A key aim across schools related to supporting students' planned transition to the next stage of education with a view to enabling them to participate as fully as possible in their education. Another key aim was to build students' confidence in continuing their education. This was very pertinent for vulnerable learners who experienced significant challenges in accessing remote teaching and learning. Building students' self-confidence was seen as a key enabler for effective learning. In some schools, an emphasis on developing students' technical skills informed the planning of the

programme and staff hoped to develop the capacity among students to cope well with the schools' online platforms so as to succeed better in school.

In some schools which had special classes, the key aims of the programme also included facilitating students' learning of routines and the development of social skills. In a few schools where students from the special class were due to take State Examinations, the aims included supporting students with strategies to cope with stress and pressure of examinations and also how to plan to do projects and Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) associated with these examinations.

Planning for the development of key skills of literacy and numeracy was evident in all programmes and schools successfully integrated this into their programmes. The development and learning of life skills featured among the aims in some programmes. In these programmes, a strong emphasis on planning to support students' learning of culinary skills, money management, and self-management was evident

The overseer and the staff delivering the programme were involved in planning the programme. Typically, the overseer played a key role in developing a vision for the programme, and an overarching view of how the key skills could be integrated across the programme content. Teachers delivering on the programme planned collaboratively and usually in a cross-curricular manner. They drew on their expertise and on the guidelines to plan effectively for the programme.

#### **Theme 4: Continuous Professional Development**

Staff in all schools visited by inspectors reported engaging well with the continuous professional development (CPD) materials and webinars provided by the Department. Almost all schools reported that the CPD and webinars were very accessible. The "Come Dine with Me" exemplar was referenced several times as being very useful for integrating the development of literacy, numeracy and social skills across an effective and fun learning activity. Resources and materials were generally received very favourably by teachers who stated that these were clear and useful for the programme. Almost all schools stated that they included information and ideas from the CPD in their planning and delivery of the programme.

Overseers commented favourably on the information and clarity contained in the Department's Guidance document. Overseers welcomed the autonomy and flexibility of the framework provided in this resource, and declared it to be very helpful. Teachers and overseers gave inspectors very useful feedback and suggestions for improvement in relation the CPD materials developed. Suggestions for improvement included:

- Inviting teachers with experience of running the programme to deliver CPD
- Establishing a network of overseers to share experience of what works well
- Providing CPD materials which contain distinct sections and more detailed information on the different role

- Providing more support and guidance for administrative tasks, such as how to register students for the course.

### **Theme 5: Delivery Of The Summer Programme**

Generally, staff in schools were of the view that the programme was running very well. In almost all schools, teachers reported that students were actively engaged, and were enjoying and benefitting from the programme.

Inspectors observed many aspects of programmes that were working very well on the days of the visits to schools. These included:

- Opportunities for students to interact socially in less formal ways where the development of friendships between students from different year groups was facilitated in a very natural way.
- Structured mentoring between senior and junior cycle students.
- Calm, relaxed and well-organised student-centred environments.
- Active learning tasks which incorporated a lot of opportunities for students to develop social and communication skills through group and project work.
- A focus on teamwork and socialisation.
- Very good integration of literacy, numeracy and digital skills.
- Students developing good reflective skills, building their capacity in learning to learn.
- Students being accommodated to work at their level and a wide variety of activities.
- Learning in a fun, meaningful way and experiencing a sense of success.

In interaction with inspectors during these visits, students reported that they were enjoying the programme very much and benefitting from their participation. In particular, the opportunities to undertake a variety of new activities, and to learn in a fun and new way, enabled them to develop a very positive perspective on their education. Students cited getting on with their peers, communicating in lots of different ways, mixing with different age groups, being allowed to make mistakes, smaller class sizes and the variety of activities as being among the very positive activities. One student referenced the fact that “it is completely different to school” as being the most positive aspect of the programme.

Supporting students’ wellbeing was regarded by all teachers and overseers as a critical component underpinning the delivery of the programme. Inspectors found great attention to supporting learners’ physical, emotional and social wellbeing when visiting schools. Typically, schools aimed to incorporate wellbeing into all aspects of the programme. Students’ physical wellbeing was supported by a wide range of activities such as yoga, mindfulness, and orienteering. Many schools offered different sports such as rounders, tennis and water sports. Social wellbeing was supported in most

programmes through activities such as cookery, baking, meal preparation and eating together.

In order to ensure effective delivery of the programme good use was made of the schools' existing resources, such as IT infrastructure, large classrooms and school grounds. Additional resources that were needed to run some programmes included the hire of transport for trips, arts and crafts materials, food for cookery activities and rewards and prizes. Staff resources as allocated by the Department, overall, were appropriate for the number of students participating in programmes and their needs.

### **Theme 6: Content of The Summer Programme**

Almost all schools provided excellent content in the summer programme. This was especially evident where good advance planning of cross-curricular activities took place. Typically, cross-curricular projects encompassed literacy, numeracy, digital skills and some practical skills.

Usually these projects and activities were also underpinned by the aim of developing the key skills of Junior Cycle:

- Being Literate
- Managing Myself
- Staying Well
- Managing Information and Thinking
- Being Numerate
- Being Creative
- Working with Others
- Communicating

This was especially evident across projects that involved food preparation, making wood work pieces, the creation of music/ drama events and a host of other fun activities that supported students' learning in an interesting way. Projects were devised by teachers to maximise opportunities for students to work and learn together. This was done in a very natural way and served to ensure that students developed their communication skills and enhanced friendships.

The "Come Dine with me" activity that was presented as part of CPD featured in almost all programmes. Schools constructed this activity in very creative ways. Best practice was noted where the associated tasks facilitated the development of several skills. This was done by asking students to research different recipes, whereby students developed their literacy and IT skills. Numeracy skills were strengthened as the learners had to work to a predetermined budget and investigate where they could buy the necessary ingredients for their chosen recipe. Students then presented their choices verbally, so as to practise their oral literacy skills. Students developed their social skills by working

together in pairs or groups to prepare the food and improved their capacity to prepare, cook and clean up after meals. This provided excellent opportunity to hone key life skills.

Generally, there was great variety in the content offered by schools. The daily timetables and weekly schedules reflected this variety in a myriad of ways. Typically, outdoor activities were well organized to ensure that students were involved to a maximum level in planning of and participation in such outings. Schools brought students orienteering, boating, kayaking, swimming and walking. Variety was also offered in terms of enabling students to develop creative skills through film studies, music, art, dance and drama. During inspector visits to schools, students spoke enthusiastically about the great variety of activities that they enjoyed in the course of the programme.

In a few cases the content offered was lacking in variety. This was typically characterised by replicating the school day, a narrow range of activities and no exploration of the local environment or trips to places of interest. Where content lacked variety there was also a lack of motivation among students in terms of their enthusiasm and participation.

### **Theme 7: Student Voice**

Some very good practice was evident in relation to capturing student voice. This included:

- Asking students in advance what they would like to do and including students' ideas in the planning of the programme.
- Reviewing students' feedback in the course of the programme and modifying the programme to incorporate this feedback.
- Building daily reflection into the timetable at the end of every day which informed ongoing daily planning.
- Providing choices so that students could exercise a degree of autonomy over learning activities.
- Offering choices between different activities provided and students could choose different project titles.
- Incorporating suggestions from students..
- Facilitating students choice for lunch each day.

In the course of visits, inspectors noted that students reported they felt listened to and that their opinions were taken into account. This increased their motivation and interest in attending. In some schools, staff reported to inspectors that they intended to build in more opportunities to capture student voice in future years.

### **Theme 8: Parental Voice (as reported by school)**

Almost all schools worked very closely with parents to support and encourage them to enroll their child in the summer programme. Parental voice and involvement were supported in many ways including:

- Formal detailed surveys sent to parents in advance and using this information to plan..
- Overseer meeting with parents in advance of the programme.
- Principals sending parents the draft timetable for the programme and inviting feedback.
- In the case of young people with complex needs, daily contact with and feedback to parents.
- Good communication and feedback to parents through daily emails.
- Use of an app that provided translation of texts into home languages for parents of EAL students.
- Parents being invited to review their child’s learning journal which captured their daily learning.
- Powerpoint presentations on a weekly basis for parents to show students’ learning activities.
- Parents being invited to the “premiere” of a film which was written and produced by their children during the programme.
- Parents receiving the programme for the following day to be explained each afternoon, so their children would experience predictability.

### **Theme 9: Review and Monitoring**

As part of their reflection on what they would do differently next time, teachers and principals referenced the following:

- A few schools who could only run the programme for one week, would choose to offer it over two weeks in future.
- Change the timing of the programme to run closer to the start of the new academic year.
- Avoid running the programme close to the August bank holiday as this impacted on attendance.
- Communicate with parents earlier in the process to optimise participation of students and increase numbers attending the programme.
- Capture parent and student voice earlier in the planning process.
- Incorporate school meals into the programme.
- Incorporate more literacy into the activities and tasks into the programme.
- Open the programme to different year groups in junior cycle.



As part of the review, most schools cited the lateness of the Department's announcement of the funding for the programme as a significant impediment to both the uptake among students and timely planning of the programme. Recruiting staff to teach on the programme was also reported as being problematic in some instances as most teachers and SNAs had already plans in place for the school holiday period. A key message for the Department was therefore the need to announce the summer programme in a timely fashion that allows schools optimise the chances of running a successful programme and maximises the participation of all students who would benefit from such a programme.

The key benefits of the Summer Programme as cited by principals, overseers and teachers were that students:

- Made new friends and therefore, experienced enhanced wellbeing.
- Experienced learning in a fun way through active participation.
- Developed greater self-confidence and self-belief in their ability to learn.
- Were well prepared for the transition back to school and had revisited school routines to good effect.
- Improved their communication and social skills.
- Demonstrated greater ability to self-regulate throughout the day.
- Were better equipped to use the school's digital platform and had improved their overall digital skills.
- Experienced a greater sense ownership of their learning.
- Had a better sense of social, emotional and physical wellbeing.

It was notable that, in many schools, teachers reported that the Summer Programme worked better for students than the July provision (home based and one to one). This was due to the fact that students had very good opportunities to develop their social skills with their peers. It was also reported that students had more opportunities to develop their sporting and digital skills due to the nature of the programme.

## Examples of exemplary practice

Inspectors witnessed a variety of excellent practices across schools in the course of their visits to schools. SNAs, teachers and overseers demonstrated innovation and creativity in many different ways. School personnel planned and implemented the Summer Programme to maximise good learning opportunities for their students.

The skillful integration of literacy and numeracy across learning tasks was noted by many inspectors as being highly effective. This was found in many types of project and field work. One inspector cited as exemplary practice a project involving redesigning a



bedroom with a fixed budget. This involved research, measurement, pricing, design, planning a trip to a local provider of bedroom furniture and writing up the project.

Physical activities were built into many programmes and particular efforts were made to offer students with opportunities to try new sports. Exemplary practice was seen where this was done in a very inclusive manner which ensured that students with physical disabilities, including wheel chair users could participate fully in physical activities.

In one school, it was agreed that students and teachers would be on first name terms to help distinguish the programme from ‘normal’ school interactions and to help build relationships between the teachers and students when back in school. This proved very successful for the students and contributed to a less formal atmosphere. Students reported very positively on this.

As part of the daily review, some schools held an informal debrief at the end of each day. This informed the planning for the following day and allowed school personnel to provide rich information about students’ progress and needs.

Another very good example of innovative practice was cited as providing students with the opportunity to plan all elements of day trips, including the location. This involved students using digital skills in the research phase, and numeracy skills as they needed to work out budgets and costing of the trip. Students used their literacy skills in reading and presenting information orally.

In a few schools, teachers reported very favourably on working with their peers as a powerful means of reviewing and improving their own teaching practice. The flexibility of the Summer Programme facilitated teachers working together with groups of students and observing each other’s practice. One teacher stated that she “was a well-established teacher who had been in the school for a number of years but found the opportunity to observe her peers in action very enriching”

## Scenarios/vignettes of good practice

### School A

The overseer took photographs every morning of the students working on different tasks. These photographs were then displayed and used during lunch break to facilitate conversations among the students about their learning. The focus of the programme was on the completion of projects e.g. the making of planted window boxes. Through the use of photographs students clearly saw the progression in their learning from making the flower box out of raw materials, painting it, planting it and completing it. The students experienced a real sense of success in their learning at each stage of the task and enjoyed using the photographs as a powerful aide memoire to revisit their learning and to celebrate the success of their achievements.

### **School B**

The school had two small dogs who made a regular appearance at the Summer Programme. One of the students with selective muteness was happy to talk about the dogs and loved walking them when on outdoor activities. The overseer reported to the Inspectorate that for the previous two years this student had not uttered a word in her class. All of the students loved the dogs and took it in turns to walk and pet them.

### **School C**

The school reported that one student who participated in the programme had not left the house since March 2020, i.e. for 15 months. Through the very careful cooperation of teachers, parents and principal this student was attending the programme. The principal deemed this to be the greatest success of the programme.

### **School D**

In one school, the programme aimed to support tolerance, inclusion and positive intercultural relationships. As part of the programme, parents were invited in to an intercultural food event. Parents with a variety of different nationalities were invited to bring traditional food to the school and students and their parents had the opportunity to learn about and taste food from other countries.

### **School E**

One school provided excellent methods of communication for parents whose home language is not English. Using very simple technology, the letter inviting students to participate in the programme was translated into the home languages of the parents. During the course of the programme the school made use of a translation app to send messages for parents. These messages were then translated directly into parents' home languages.

## **Examples of practice where there was scope for development**

### **School A**

In one school, the programme delivered was almost exclusively based on Mathematics. The school had low uptake compared to the number of places offered and several students dropped out of the programme after the first or second day. For the most part, the programme involved the teaching of Mathematics inside in a classroom at a desk. When it was evident that students had dropped out, the programme was not altered nor were any significant efforts made to encourage attendance.

### **School B**

The programme was offered exclusively to EAL students. This segregated approach resulted in EAL students not having opportunities to practise English with native speakers in an inclusive environment.

### School C

Teachers were using textbooks as the main resource as the programme. This resulted in a focus on academic content. Students were less engaged in this setting.

## PHASE 2: The longer-term impact of Summer Programme 2021

### Retrospective views of Principals or Overseers (collected in January 2022)

Schools were very appreciative of all the materials issued by the Department including the Operational Guidelines and the Framework for Teaching and Learning which were issued in advance of the summer programme in 2021. Schools reported that these were very clear and helpful. Some schools noted that the accompanying webinar was particularly useful, as they were able to revisit this at times to double check information and revisit key details. Many schools suggested that as a future focus for CPD, video clips of teachers who have delivered on the summer programme would be very helpful and that the focus of such materials would be on very practical tips. As this would be a very appropriate support for schools, it should be considered by the Department in advance of the Summer Programme 2022.

Overseers and teachers found the resources and hyperlinks very useful when planning their programmes. Schools reported that these resources acted as good triggers and they were able to adapt the resources to suit the individual needs of their own students. Schools suggested that more time was needed in advance of the programme to plan, to set up and get input from the SEN department and Student Support Team, and therefore it would be better if the application process for the Summer Programme and CPD were available at an earlier stage. It was also suggested that the preparation time of 10 hours per week of the programme needs to be extended to take account of the size of the group, the amount of groups and the complexity of students' needs. This would enable a more integrated approach to planning and reflection time for the overseer.

In relation to resources provided by the Department, schools noted that providing school meals was very welcome and that a number of students enrolled in the programme specifically because of the provision of food. This encouraged students to attend and was a great support to families.

All schools reported good or very good student engagement with their summer programme. In almost all cases, student attendance throughout the programme was good and punctuality was also deemed to be overall good. The fact that breakfast and lunch were provided in a number of programmes proved to be a very positive factor in ensuring good punctuality and attendance. Only a minority of students had poor

attendance and in a few instances students only attended for one week as family holidays had been booked.

Students were happy to come to school for the programme and the mix of academic and non-academic activities served to increase their participation and fun in learning. Students completed tasks assigned and also finalised projects they were working on in the course of the two weeks. Students' digital skills clearly advanced over the programme and they became more proficient at using the IT platforms of the school. Student engagement was optimal during trips and outings and these proved to be very successful in all schools. For some students it was the first time that they visited museums, beaches or places of historical/geographical interest in their own locality.

Schools had a variety of key areas which they wished to focus on when they developed the programme. All schools highlighted the importance of students' social skills, improving communications skills, wellbeing and developing positive relationships as central to their summer programme. Schools also aimed to limit regression among learners and develop a stronger sense of connection with the school. All schools had the development of the key skills of literacy and numeracy as central to their programme.

Many schools stated that they used the learners' interests and materials developed by the NCSE to inform the focus of their programme. This reportedly worked very well and could usefully be applied to all programmes in future. The importance of developing life skills and independent learning skills was also underlined by school personnel.

In some instances, schools cited that they had noted an increase in racism, and therefore perceived the need for students to have more opportunities for social interactions that involved respectful scaffolding with adult positive role models. The summer programme provided this in a very appropriate way.

There was overwhelming evidence in the collection of feedback from schools that the summer programmes in post-primary schools achieved their objectives as set out by the Department of Education. This evidence was provided by schools in a myriad of ways and through a number of very impressive and at times moving examples, in terms of the real impact on young peoples' lives.

Teachers spoke of increased levels of motivation, confidence and independence which developed over the course of the programme. Teachers have remarked on the ability of students who attended the Summer Programme to complete tasks, participate in CBAs more successfully and demonstrate enhanced digital competencies.

Students who do not speak English as their first language were reported to benefit from participation in summer programmes. These students benefitted particularly from increased exposure to English and improved their literacy skills. There was also

improved cultural awareness among students who were very happy to learn about other students' backgrounds and traditions.

Many schools reported that the most evident and enduring impact of the programme is to be seen in the development of relationships and social skills. Teachers noted that when students returned to school it was clear that they had formed friendship groups and they supported each other in ways that did not happen previously.

It was also noted that students' attitudes to school have improved. Some students who struggled with managing their own behaviours are now exhibiting significant improvement. This is ensuring a much more positive learning experience for them. Some schools gathered formal feedback from students at the end of the programme, which was resoundingly positive. Students reported the social side of the programme as being very successful.

Very importantly, school personnel reported a sense of satisfaction in the key role that they played in making a real difference in the lives of their students through the Summer Programme. Teachers designed their own programmes and collaborated to ensure all aspects of the programme were very active and engaging.

A variety of practices was evident in ensuring that learning from the Summer Programme was formally captured and used to inform the practice of teachers once school reopened in September 2021. Many schools adopted an informal approach and provided oral reports to colleagues about which students had taken part in the programme, what they had done and what progress had been made. Some schools reported that they confined the feedback to the SEN team. Some teachers who had taught on the programme noted that they now understood and had got to know those learners who participated on the programme much better and this led to a greater understanding of their interests and their challenges around learning. This was reported as being very helpful in planning for teaching and learning.

There was also a variety of practices in ensuring that learning from the summer programme fed into the work of the SEN team and Student Support Team (SST). Predominantly, feedback was provided at SEN and SST meetings. In some cases, information was updated in Student Support Files. In some schools, the SEN team and SST were already planning who might be suitable and in need of this support for summer 2022, due to the great success of their programme in 2021. In schools where the overseer or the staff were part of the SEN or SST teams, the transfer of information appeared to be easier and more streamlined.

Despite the value of the informal sharing of information among school staff about the participation of students in the Summer Programme, it was clear that such informal approaches are not adequate. There is a need for post-primary schools to adopt a more systematic and structured approach to ensuring that the learning from the programme

feeds into the planning for teaching and learning and informs planning for supporting students' needs. A few schools suggested that guidance on how to do this would be very welcome. The Department could usefully provide guidance on this in future programmes. The Inspectorate, in the course of visits to the summer programmes, should take time to discuss this with principals and members of staff.

There was very strong evidence in all schools of the significant and ongoing positive impact of the summer programme on students. In many cases, schools had examples of students who had disengaged almost completely or who had stopped attending school altogether, who are now back at school and participating very well in their education.

Schools reported that students who participated in the summer programme are now experiencing school in a more positive way and this is very much due to improved social skills and stronger relationships with both peers and teachers. In many schools, there are examples of students who did not have friends and were enabled to develop friendships through the summer programme. The key evidence in relation to impact is that these friendships have lasted throughout the school year. This has brought about a much greater sense of wellbeing, belonging and overall happiness for these students.

Improved student experience of transition back to school at the start of the academic year was a very definite outcome of the summer programme. The impact of the support provided through the summer programme for transition cannot be underestimated in terms of the importance for students' longer term outcomes, and in particular their retention in post-primary schools. Some schools which provided the summer programmes to incoming first-year students reported very successful impact on this critical transition from primary to post-primary schools. These students learned about their new school, made new friends and got to know some of their new teachers. Once the school opened in September, these students demonstrated very good confidence and increased sense of security as they were already familiar with the school. For students who were already enrolled in schools, they experienced a positive transition at the start of the academic year, as they had established new friendships and also had revisited school routines in the course of the summer programme.

There is strong evidence that participation in the Summer Programme has been life altering for some students and their families. Policy makers should note that the provision of such a programme has enabled a number of students in post-primary schools to continue their education in a positive and productive manner, instead of leaving the school system early. This has enormous long-term value economically, educationally and socially.

Schools demonstrated excellent reflective practice on what they might do differently in future programmes. Almost all schools would like to begin the planning process earlier in the school year. This would also have the benefit of having more time to work with parents on convincing them of the merits of participation in the programme for their

children. Schools were very keen to encourage more students to take part in light of the lasting impact of the programme that they have witnessed this year. Equally, principals and overseers talked about ways to attract more teachers with a wide skill set to teach on the programme. This was seen as an important factor in enriching the programme for future years.

In reflecting on the content of their programme, many schools would make adjustments to ensure more external activities such as cultural visits and outdoor activities were included, as these proved to have such a motivational impact on the students.

## Views of parents/guardians

During Phase 2 of the research in January 2022, parents whose children attended the Summer Programme in the sample of nine schools were invited to take part in an anonymous online survey about their child's experience of the programme. In total, fifty-three parents responded. This section presents an analysis of the survey.

Almost all parents strongly agreed or agreed that their child enjoyed attending the Summer Programme. Parents cited social interaction, a more relaxed atmosphere and the variety of activities as being key enablers of their child's enjoyment of the programme. Some parents noted that they were very pleased that their children had a sense of achievement by learning and maintaining new life skills such as making a shopping list, going shopping and baking. Some parents stated that their children learned about new subjects and tried out new outdoor activities which enhanced their enjoyment of the programme.

Almost all parents strongly agreed or agreed that the Summer Programme helped their child to remain connected with the school, the teachers and his/her friends. Parents praised schools for the real opportunities that their children had to remain connected to school and to make friends through the programme. They mentioned that their children found it easier to make friends in the smaller groups and that they gained in social confidence. Many parents cited the more relaxed approach to learning as very supportive for the students.

Almost all parents strongly agreed or agreed that the school discussed their child's learning plans for the Summer Programme with them. More than half of the parents strongly agreed or agreed that the Summer Programme helped their child to make up for at least some of the learning gaps caused by the school closures of 2020 and 2021. A small number of parents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this.

Almost all parents agreed or strongly agreed that the Summer Programme promoted a sense of safety, calm and hope for their child. Many parents were very grateful that their children experienced a renewed sense of hope in their learning experiences. This was



predominantly due to the very calm atmosphere promoted in the programme and also because the young people experienced greater success in their learning than they might in larger more formal settings. Parents reported that their children felt calmer about returning to school after the holidays as the programme had set them up for that transition in a very positive manner.

Supporting effective transitions to the next phase of education was seen as a very important outcome of participation in the Summer Programme by parents. Most parents strongly agreed or agreed that the programme helped their child to transition into the new school year. Parents reported that their children felt more confident about the next school year and were familiar with school routines again. One parent stated “The programme helped my son to prepare for going back to school in September as he is a very anxious child. He got to meet his new teachers and knew his way around the school”

Parents were positive about the school’s reporting mechanisms and about the overall progress their children had made during the programme. More than half of all parents strongly agreed or agreed that they were provided with a progress report at the end of the Summer Programme. Most parents strongly agreed or agreed that they were overall satisfied with the progress their child made during the Summer Programme. One parent stated that due to language difficulties, their child has nobody to play with but the summer programme provided great opportunity to interact with peers. The parent stated “I did not see him so happy all summer”

## Key post-primary findings

- The Summer Programme was a very successful initiative offered by the Department of Education and had a significant impact on the lives of many post-primary students who attended the programme.
- The timing of the announcement of the Summer Programme for post-primary schools was later than optimal, and impacted on maximising engagement by schools in the programme.
- The operational and framework guidance documents issued by the Department were very well received by schools and found to be very clear and helpful.
- Some schools had difficulty recruiting staff to teach on the programme due to the late announcement of the programme and the impact of the prolonged public health crisis.
- Student attendance was very good overall. There was a strong correlation between very good planning, programme content, modes of delivery and student participation and attendance. The stronger the link with making the programme content enjoyable and relevant to students’ interests and lives the better the attendance.
- Good communication with parents proved to have a very positive impact on student attendance.



- The long term impact of participation in the programme for students is very positive, and has enhanced students' educational experience in a very powerful manner.
- For some students, participation in the programme mitigated a real risk of early school leaving.
- The impact on students' wellbeing as a result of their engagement with the Summer Programme has been overwhelmingly positive, in particular regarding the development of positive relationships with teachers and the development of friendships with peers.
- Students experienced a more successful transition to school at the beginning of this academic year as a result of the Summer Programme.
- Parents reported significant positive outcomes for their children as a result of engagement with the Summer Programme.

## Recommendations for the Post-Primary School Summer Programme

- The Summer Programme for 2022 should be announced as soon as possible to ensure that post-primary schools have adequate time to advertise and plan the programme.
- The Department should continue to issue clear guidance documents to schools and minimise administrative burdens on schools.
- The Department should enhance the suite of CPD support to include webinars and materials designed by overseers and teachers who have successfully implemented the programme in 2021.
- The Department should, as part of CPD, include supportive guidance to assist schools on how to establish a structured approach to ensure that key information from the programme feeds into the planning for future teaching and learning.
- Schools should include parent and student voice at the planning and implementation stages of the programme, and a formal review capturing the views of parents and students should take place at the end of the programme.
- The Department's Inspectorate should conduct further research on the Summer Programme in 2022.
- Policy makers should note that the provision of such a programme has, in some instances, reduced early school leaving, and therefore has significant long-term value economically, educationally and socially.

## Chapter 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

In recognition of the challenges posed by periods of school closure in the years 2020 and 2021, the Department of Education announced a number of supports to enable primary, post-primary and special schools to offer summer programmes during the school holidays in 2021. In keeping with the guidelines underpinning the summer programme provision, schools prioritised children and young people with complex special educational needs and those at most risk of educational disadvantage.

This report provides information about how the Summer Programmes was transacted at school level. Significant insights into the planning, operation and impact of the summer programmes have been gained from Inspectorate research, through visits to schools, follow up interviews and parental surveys.

It is clearly evident that the Summer Programme is a very worthwhile endeavour, and that the funding for this initiative has been well used by schools to impact in a most positive way on the lives of children and young people.

### Overall key findings

- The Summer Programme was a very successful initiative offered by the Department of Education, and had a significant impact on the lives of many children and young people who attended the programme.
- Most school staff reported that they were aware of the Department’s guidance and had found it clear and useful as they prepared for the programme. The flexibility and autonomy provided in the guidance was welcomed by most schools.
- There was evidence of good collaboration between school leaders, class teachers and the special education team in planning for the delivery of their programme
- While the views of students often influenced the content and delivery of the programmes, very few schools had a formal mechanism to collect students’ views.
- While the majority of principals and overseers indicated that they had taken parents’ views on board when planning their *Summer Programmes*, a significant minority of principals and overseers had planned their programmes without formally seeking parental views.
- Attendance was very good overall. There was a strong correlation between very good planning, programme content, modes of delivery and learner participation and attendance. The stronger the link with making the programme content enjoyable and relevant to learners’ interests and lives the better the attendance.

- Inspectors noted many aspects of exemplary practice across all versions of the programme.
- Across all types of schools and settings, inspectors reported that the programme was running very well and that in almost all cases, it was being delivered in a manner consistent with the guidelines. In particular, they noted that most programmes included a very wide variety of enjoyable activities and that students were engaged enthusiastically in their learning.
- Almost all parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child enjoyed attending the *Summer Programme*
- The impact on students' wellbeing as a result of their engagement with the Summer Programme has been overwhelmingly positive, in particular regarding the development of positive relationships with teachers and the development of friendships with peers. Other positive long-term impacts noted were better attendance, engagement or improved skills.
- Almost all principals indicated that they would offer the programme again in 2022 but they expressed a strong wish for the Department to announce the programme earlier in the school year to enable advance preparations at school level.

## Overall Key Recommendations

- The Department should finalise and publish its plans and guidance for the 2022 *Summer Programme* for primary and special schools before the end of April to enable school-level planning and staff recruitment to be completed in a timely manner.
- Guidance documents and webinars to support teaching and learning should continue to emphasise flexibility and school autonomy, but they should also provide examples of optional planning and reporting templates for schools which require support on these matters.
- The Department should enhance the suite of CPD support to include webinars and materials designed by overseers and teachers who have successfully implemented the programme in 2021.
- The Department's Inspectorate should conduct further research on the Summer Programme in 2022.
- Policy makers should note that the provision of such a programme has, in some instances, reduced early school leaving, and therefore has significant long-term value economically, educationally and socially.
- All schools participating in the 2022 programme should implement measures to formally include the parent and student voice in programme planning.

