

Schools and Severe Weather

Be prepared, be informed, be vigilant

Preparation

Schools should conduct a pre-event evaluation of what should be, or could be, in place to ensure the opening of the school in the event of severe weather. Areas for consideration are maintenance of school premises and utilities, salting and gritting and transport to and from school. Access in the school to a battery-operated radio and flashlights should be put in place.

Schools should ensure that every member of staff is clear as to their role and responsibilities during severe weather including in the event of a school closure. A member of staff should be assigned to monitor weather conditions and to contact the principal response agencies and school transport services where required.

Included in the school's plan for severe weather should be the proposed responses and roles which will apply in the event of a Red level weather warning from Met Éireann.

Communications

Schools should ensure they have the relevant contact details of the principal response agencies for their area, including An Garda Síochána, fire brigade and local authorities and other appropriate services. Schools should also have contact details for the transport services serving their school. These details should be checked regularly and kept up-to-date.

Schools should establish communications with neighbouring schools to ensure, as far as practicable, a unified local response to severe weather events may be implemented. It is noted however that while schools in an area may try to co-ordinate their decisions, the circumstances can vary between individual schools in close proximity and may on occasions lead to different decisions being taken by schools.

Most schools use a text messaging service to communicate with parents and staff. Local radio, the school's website or social media may also be useful to alert parents and students to school conditions and closure should this arise.

State Examinations

In the event of severe weather during scheduled state examinations the State Examinations Commission will communicate with schools to put in place alternative arrangements.

Closing a School

The decision to close a school rests with the school management authority taking into consideration the full guidance and direction available from the principal response agencies, especially An Garda Síochána. Any decision to close is taken in the interest of

child safety, having assessed the local risks and having consulted, as appropriate, with school transport operators.

Some of the issues that schools should consider include:

- conditions in the school itself
- the capacity of the school to ensure the health and safety of students whilst in school
- the ability of parents, students, staff and school transport services to safely negotiate local road conditions to reach the school
- guidance and direction from the principal response agencies

Guidance on time lost due to unforeseen closures because of severe weather is set out in circular 16/2014 which is available on the Department's website www.education.ie.

Weather Warnings from Met Éireann

Schools should monitor weather forecasts to be prepared for any severe weather which may affect the school. During periods of severe weather schools should assess the situation using the above guidance. Schools should be prepared, keep themselves informed and remain vigilant.

Met Éireann issues colour coded weather warnings as follows:

- Status Yellow – be aware
- Status Orange – be prepared
- Status Red – take action

Schools should respond appropriately to such warnings using the above guidance.

It should be borne in mind that there may also be weather events which may be fast moving with little warning. For example, consider the case of Storm Darwin in February 2014 where Met Éireann had issued a Status Red alert for the Cork and Kerry regions; however, on that occasion the weather moved rapidly across the southern half of the country affecting a number of other counties.

There may also be Status Orange weather warnings that may require action to be taken because of the particular local circumstances, e.g. in areas prone to flooding or areas located on the coast. Any assessment taken by the school for actions necessary should be guided by local knowledge and experience and by way of advice from the principal response agencies.

Status Red Weather Warning

All weather warnings of Status Red will require some action on behalf of schools. Schools need to assess the potential impact of such weather events taking account of past experiences and considering advice on the current event from the principal response agencies in their area.

A Status Red weather warning for heavy rain may be particularly relevant if the local area is prone to flooding. A Status Red warning related to ice or snow which may compact may cause local issues due to the location of the school and/or the routes taken to reach the school.

Status Red Weather Warning for Wind

Schools should note in particular Status Red weather warnings where strong winds or storm conditions are forecasted. Due to the high degree of unpredictability as to the impact of the weather associated with such a Status Red warning on local conditions schools should use the following guidance to assist them in making their assessment.

Status Red weather warning for wind related conditions may be given in advance of a school opening or it may arise during the day while a school is underway.

Advance Warning of Status Red

Following consultation at a national level with the Office of Emergency Planning and the management bodies for schools, the Department of Education and Skills' advice to schools is that they should consider not opening where a Status Red weather warning related to wind is forecast to coincide with the period/s during which students and staff would be expected to be travelling to and from school.

Whether the school should open later in the day where an improvement to the weather is forecast is a decision which should be taken in consultation with An Garda Síochána, the local authorities, school transport services and other appropriate agencies based in the school's area.

Warning of Status Red that arises during the school day

Where the Status Red weather warning related to wind is issued when the school is already underway with students and staff present, the school management should immediately contact An Garda Síochána, the school transport services and other appropriate agencies for advice on whether it may be safe to undertake journeys from the school or when such journeys should commence. Consideration should also be taken as to the safety of parents undertaking journeys to the school to collect children.

Where a decision may have to be taken on health and safety grounds based on the advice available to the school for students and staff to remain on the school premises during a Status Red warning related to wind, then schools should plan for such an eventuality by considering how students and staff can be accommodated within the school while awaiting an improvement in the weather. Such decisions should be taken based on the health and safety of all concerned taking account of the prevailing and forecast weather conditions in the vicinity of the school.

Status Red Advisory

For Services in Counties	Contact Office	Phone No.
Westmeath, Longford, Offaly, Roscommon, Laois Athlone		<u>(090) 6473277</u>

For Services in Counties	Contact Office	Phone No.
Mayo	Ballina	<u>(096) 71816</u>
Dublin, Kildare, Wicklow, Meath	Dublin	<u>(01) 8302222</u>
Louth, Monaghan, Cavan	Dundalk	<u>(042) 9355069</u> <u>(042) 9355065</u>
Clare, Limerick	Limerick	<u>(061) 217484</u>
Galway	Galway	<u>(091) 537694</u> <u>(091) 537512</u>
Sligo, Leitrim	Sligo	<u>(071) 9160440</u>
Donegal	Stranorlar	<u>(074) 9131008</u>
Waterford, Carlow, Kilkenny, Wexford	Waterford	<u>(051) 873401</u>
Kerry	Tralee	<u>(066) 7164750</u>
Cork	Cork	<u>(021) 4276891</u>
Tipperary	Tipperary	<u>(076) 106 5000</u>