



To

**BOARDS OF MANAGEMENT AND PRINCIPALS OF POST-
PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICERS OF
EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARDS**

September, 2015

Circular 0051/2015

Promotion of Healthy Lifestyles in Post-Primary schools

1. Context for guidance on healthy lifestyles

Schools and the wider education sector have a vital role to play in contributing to the 'Healthy Ireland' agenda that is being led by the Department of Health and is supported by the Department of Education and Skills and other Government Departments. Schools are contributing to the overall physical and mental health and well-being of our young people, including through the promotion of healthy eating and physical activity. But there are many challenges for our young people if they are to adopt a healthy lifestyle and enjoy positive health and wellbeing to their full potential. We can, in collaboration with others, all do more to address these challenges. This circular aims to support and strengthen schools' efforts in this regard. It will also support schools to implement the new area of learning known as 'Wellbeing' being implemented from 2017 as part of the new Junior Cycle Framework.

It is important for the present and future health of our population that students are equipped with the key skills and knowledge which will enable them more confidently to make healthier life choices. It is equally important that schools' efforts in this area are complemented and reinforced by practices in students' homes and in the wider community. The Healthy Ireland agenda is committed to supporting everyone's efforts to improve their health and wellbeing. In addition, evidence shows that healthy lifestyle behaviours can improve academic performance, educational behaviour and students' cognitive skills. Such health benefits for young people are inextricably linked with their overall development.

The results of the 2012 'Lifeskills' survey, which were published by the Department of Education and Skills in February 2014¹ highlighted some areas where post-primary schools were particularly proactive and also areas where schools could strengthen the quality of their provision in relation to the Healthy Ireland agenda. This was particularly the case in relation to the promotion of healthy eating and physical activity among students, where there have been some improvements compared to the results of the 2009 survey, but where further progress is required. The relevant findings from the 2012 'Lifeskills' survey, in relation to healthy lifestyles, indicate that among respondent post-primary schools:

- Approximately 55% had a formal Healthy Eating policy in place, or being developed, in 2012, compared to 50% in 2009.
- Some 66% promote healthy lunches, compared to 64% in 2009.
- Some 30% have a vending machine or school shop which sells 'junk food', compared to 35% in 2009.
- Some 64% have a facility for the sale of fresh fruit, which is identical to the position reported in 2009.
- 37% are participating in the 'Health Promoting Schools' (HPS) initiative, compared to 36% in 2009.
- More than 90% are not implementing the recommended two hours of P.E. provision per week (with the exception of Transition Year). This position has deteriorated since 2009.
- 96% support sporting activities outside of school time, a similar proportion to 2009.
- 86% encourage physical activity during breaks compared to 89% in 2009.
- 97% have established student councils, which is in line with the 2009 finding.

The results of the 2015 Lifeskills survey are currently being analysed by the Department of Education and Skills and will be published before the end of 2015. This will provide a benchmark of schools' performance in these areas since 2009 and 2012.

This circular is intended to highlight to Boards of Management and Principals of post-primary schools their responsibilities in this area and to recommend measures that can be improved or adopted to promote healthy lifestyles amongst their students, with a specific focus on promoting healthy eating and physical activity.

2. Health Promoting Schools initiative

Only 37% of post-primary schools are currently participating in, or are in the process of becoming involved in, the 'Health Promoting Schools' (HPS) initiative which is led by the HSE and the Department of Health, with the support of the Department of Education and Skills. 'Health' in this context

¹ The 'Lifeskills' report is available at <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Results-of-the-Department-of-Education-and-Skills-'Lifeskills'-Survey-2012.pdf>

includes physical wellbeing but also focuses on students' emotional and psychological wellbeing.

The aims of the HPS initiative are to:

- Foster the healthy development of the whole school community.
- Provide a framework for developing health promotion initiatives in a way that supports and enhances the implementation of the curriculum.
- Support the planning, implementation and evaluation of health-related activities under school self-evaluation, and school development planning processes.
- Enhance the links between schools and their communities.

Boards of Management and Principals are strongly encouraged to participate in the HPS initiative. As part of the HPS initiative, HSE Health Promotion Officers and members of the Wellbeing pillar of the Professional Development Support Service for Teachers (PDST) collaborate on a regional basis to ensure that schools are supported in meeting the health needs of their students. Information for schools, including a Framework document *Schools for Health in Ireland: Framework for Developing a Health Promoting School, Post-Primary* and a Co-Ordinator's Handbook, as well as local support contact details, are available at www.healthpromotion.ie/health/schools.

Schools can use the HPS as a medium to engage their Student Council in decision making that contributes to the promotion of healthy lifestyles among all students and by extension, into their communities. Students should be supported, where possible, to play active roles in designing, implementing and monitoring initiatives and programmes. Such involvement is likely to result in much greater levels of engagement and more positive outcomes for the health and wellbeing of your school community.

3. Healthy Eating Policy

Schools are strongly encouraged to have a formal healthy eating policy that has been developed in consultation with students (through student councils) and parents. It is to be welcomed that 55% of post-primary schools have indicated, through the Lifeskills survey, that they have such a policy in place. However it is important that the remaining 45% of schools should prioritise the development and implementation of their healthy eating policy.

The *Guidelines for Developing a Healthy Eating Policy in Post-Primary Schools*, which have been developed by the Department of Health and HSE, are available on www.healthpromotion.ie/health/schools.

The healthy eating policy should outline how the school supports healthy eating practices through the promotion of healthy lunches and healthy snacks and other means. The PDST continues to support the SPHE and PE curricula and, through the wider lens of this curriculum support, promotes healthy eating policies (relevant material is available on www.pdst.ie and www.sphe.ie).

Many post-primary schools have a number of food outlets, including school shops and vending machines. Some schools also offer school lunches. In addition, some schools offer breakfast and after-school clubs and pre-packed lunches, making the school a key food provider for many students.

Regulating nutrient intake is not the job of schools. However, schools are well placed to support students to develop an understanding of the nutrient value of common and easily accessible products, as well the skills to make informed decisions about their nutrient intake.

Currently many food and beverage products that may be sold in schools (either through school shops or vending machines) are nutritionally poor, being high in fat, sugar and salt. Healthy school shop and vending practices will ensure that students are provided with healthier alternatives to these types of traditional 'snack' foods.

Such healthier alternatives include:

- Fruit juice or smoothie (no added sugar)
- Fresh fruit or portions of fresh fruit salad in take-away containers
- Yoghurts
- Popcorn
- Fruit or wholemeal scones/portions of wholemeal or wholegrain bread, with low-fat spread
- Grain cracker and cheese portion (preferably low-fat)
- Sandwich selection to include wholemeal/wholegrain bread or wraps with low-fat dressings
- Wholegrain or bran-type cereal mini-pack and milk (preferably low-fat)
- Cartons of low-fat milk
- Dry roasted nuts (unsalted)

The Department of Education and Skills acknowledges that the sale of food and beverage products often represents a revenue stream for schools and it is not the intention to end this practice. Rather the intention is to ensure that there is a greater proportion of healthier alternatives to some of the less healthy products that are currently on offer for sale in schools.

The key aspects of promoting a healthy school shop and vending options, based on guidance developed by the HSE², are outlined below:

- Food or beverage products that contain more than 250 calories ('kcal') **per item** should not be available for purchase on school premises.
- Food or beverage products available for purchase on school premises should be in the category of '**Better Choice**' products. For a food or beverage product to be a 'Better Choice', it must contain less than 150 calories per item and meet the criteria identified in the *Guidelines for Developing a Healthy Eating Policy in Post-Primary Schools* www.healthpromotion.ie/health/schools.

² HSE (2014), HSE Healthy Vending Policy. The Department of Education and Skills is grateful to the HSE for its advice in this regard.

Boards of Management and Principals are encouraged to provide as far as possible that only 'Better Choice' products are available for purchase on school premises. This is to incentivise the purchase of healthier options by students and staff members. Boards of Management and Principals should consult with staff, parents and students (via the student council or other means) on this issue to identify whether it is possible to prohibit entirely at school level the sale of food and beverage products that do not meet the criteria of a 'Better Choice' product.

It is recommended that beverages such as sugar sweetened soft drinks, including energy or sport drinks, should not be provided in schools. In this context, the provision of fresh drinking water for students is very important.

Schools are also encouraged to take cognisance of other important advice in relation to providing healthy food choices in the school environment:

- Advertising of food or beverage products with more than 250 calories per item should not be permitted in vending machines, shops or elsewhere within the school grounds.
- Explanation of 'Better Choice' products should be clearly displayed where these products are being sold.
- 'Better Choice' products should be placed in prime slots and at eye level to prompt their choice over less healthy offerings.
- All vended products should clearly display the amount of calories they contain alongside their price so that purchasers can use this information to help them make an informed product choice.
- Vending machines should not be encased in colours that utilise subliminal advertising to promote a product or brand.
- All vended food and beverages must comply with relevant food safety legislation.

Boards of Management and Principals are not expected to become experts in nutritional and calorie content of particular foods. They are being encouraged, however, to ensure that those supplying food and beverage products to their schools are aware of this guidance, especially when contracts are being agreed or renewed.

4. Promotion of physical activity

The promotion of physical activity can complement schools' efforts in relation to promoting healthy eating, as well as promoting students' overall mental health and well-being. The data from the 2012 Lifeskills survey indicate that schools continue to be extremely active in supporting students in physical activity outside of school hours. This is a manifestation of the dedication of teachers in encouraging their students' participation in sporting competitions and activities even where this is not a mandatory requirement. However the data also indicate that there is a need to strengthen implementation of the formal 'Physical Education' curriculum within schools.

4.1 Curricular provision for Physical Education

Principals and Boards of Management are reminded that schools are required to provide Physical Education for all students. The recommended time currently is two hours of Physical Education per week at all class levels.

It is of concern that the Lifeskills data (2009 and 2012) indicate that approximately 90% of post-primary schools do not provide the recommended minimum of two hours Physical Education per week, with the general exception of Transition Year.

4.2 Promotion of Physical Activity

Schools play an important role in promoting physical activity outside of the formal Physical Education curriculum. Physical activity is central to student wellbeing. Its importance extends beyond its role in achieving energy balance to, in certain cases, preventing and treating the adverse impact of overweight and obesity. Adequate levels of physical activity improve cardiovascular health, metabolic health, brain and mental health, musculoskeletal health and social health across the lifespan. Emerging research has also shown a positive association between physical activity, physical fitness in children and adolescents, and academic achievement. Recent research by the ESRI has indicated that participation in activities such as sports can act as 'a buffer to academic stress' (ESRI, 2015).

Under the Healthy Ireland agenda, a first National Physical Activity Plan is currently being developed by the Departments of Health, and Transport, Tourism and Sport, along with other partners including the Department of Education and Skills. This Plan will support efforts to improve the levels of physical activity in the whole population, with a particular focus on children and young people, and will support the continued important contribution schools make in this regard.

The attention of Principals and Boards of Management is drawn to the following measures that can contribute to increasing physical activity among post-primary students and that are intended to complement the full implementation of the Physical Education curriculum:

- To build on the very good work being undertaken by most schools in promoting involvement in sport, schools should engage and work with their student councils to increase the range of opportunities and programmes that support a greater number of students to adopt positive physical activity behaviours.
- Participation in the Active School Flag initiative which is funded by the Department of Education and Skills and supported by the Department of Health and the HSE. Further information on this initiative can be accessed at www.activeschoolflag.ie
- The development of a school Physical Activity plan, in consultation with students and parents to complement the forthcoming National Physical Activity Plan and using the *Get Active! Physical Education, Physical*

Activity and Sport for Children and Young People A Guiding Framework for guidance

(<http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Get-Active-Physical-Education-Physical-Activity-and-Sport-for-Children-and-Young-People-A-Guiding-Framework.pdf>)

- The development of a Green-Schools Travel Plan to encourage more students to take healthier, and more sustainable means of travelling to school such as walking and cycling (<http://www.greenschoolsireland.org/themes/travel.197.html>).

5. Conclusion

The education sector, together with our partners across relevant Government Departments and agencies, can greatly contribute to the realisation of a healthy active population, and heightening awareness of the importance of healthy lifestyle. We are committed, with your help, to ensuring that our young people have the knowledge, skills and behavioural competencies to make informed decisions to lead health-enhancing lifestyles. Schools are an integral component of our society and play a considerable transformational role in the lives of our young people. Habits created at a young age continue to inform us throughout life.

Your continued cooperation, and leadership, in contributing to the 'Healthy Ireland' agenda is acknowledged.

Schools are encouraged to take the initiative in reviewing and monitoring their own practices in these areas through whole-school consultation, reflection and action as part of the school self-evaluation (SSE) process. In addition, a culture of improvement relating to the promotion of healthy lifestyles in schools will be supported through reporting on the Lifeskills surveys as well as through whole-school evaluations, programme evaluations and subject inspections of Physical Education and SPHE.

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