



Schola Europaea

InterParents

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Distance learning for absent children

**Joint Teaching Committee – Meeting on 8 and 9 October 2020 –
Online**

For OPINION

Introduction

Building on the recent modification of the General Rules, InterParents invites the Joint Teaching Committee (JTC) to recommend: 1) the immediate implementation of distance learning arrangements for pupils who cannot be physically present at school for justified reasons, together with 2) an expedited roll-out of the distance learning policy and 3) a longer-term pedagogical analysis of how to use distance learning tools and methodologies to best serve these pupils.

1. Rationale

The present pandemic situation has revealed the urgent need to provide pedagogical solutions to those children who for whatever reason are prevented from going to school. Distance learning has shown itself an important and strategic platform enabling the delivery of education to pupils who may not be physically present at school.

Per definition, based on the General Rules of the European Schools (hereinafter 'General Rules'), teaching shall be provided on site and a student who is not 'in attendance' in class is considered absent.

Therefore, the General Rules have been recently amended with the introduction of the possibility of organising distance teaching (and learning) to educate children in exceptional cases based on a decision of the Director of the school (Article 26a (1) General Rules).

The new Article 26a gives discretionary power to the Director of the School to organise in exceptional cases distance teaching (and learning) in order to educate pupils who may not be always physically present at school.

InterParents believes that there are sound pedagogical arguments in favour of organising distance teaching for children not present in school for justified reasons. This would ensure pedagogical continuity and minimise the cases where a pupil's promotion could be threatened because of a long-term justified absence or several short-term justified absences.

2. Children's fundamental rights

Every child has the right to education (Article 28 (1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child 'Child Convention'). This includes access to both primary and secondary education (Article 28 (2) and (3) of the Child Convention).

Education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child's respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment (Article 29 of the 'Child Convention').

At the same time, every child has the inherent right to life (Article 6 (1) of the Child Convention) and the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24 (1) of the Child Convention).

In all actions concerning **children undertaken by public institutions, the best interest of the children will be a primary consideration.** (Article 3 (1) of the Convention).

3. Children who cannot physically attend school

The restart of the school post COVID-19 has brought a structural problem in the European School system to the fore: there is insufficient pedagogical support for children who cannot physically attend school for justified reasons. A portion of the student population is at risk of having their learning and well-being significantly compromised through non-attendance at school due to vulnerability or mandated-quarantine, due to pre-existing health conditions, situations of *force majeure*, or other exceptional circumstance.

This has not only pedagogical but also legal ramifications, as Article 30 of the General Rules foresees a number of negative consequences in the case of absences, including refusing promotion or access to the European Baccalaureate exams.

Covering the educational needs of a child who cannot be physically present on site for justified reasons through the implementation of distance teaching would ensure that the child would no longer be considered absent, provided that s/he complies with the distance learning requirements.

Inevitably, even with the implementation of a programme of distance learning for children not physically present on the school site for justified reasons, as defined in the General Rules, there will be situations that will not be able to be addressed (for example a child with a high fever or in coma) and these will continue to be justified absences BUT there are other exceptional situations where the child cannot physically attend the school (severe asthma, quarantine, vulnerable group, etc) but s/he can still follow a distance learning program without particular difficulty. Therefore, even the latter situations can be fully addressed with the implementation of distance learning solutions.

Education is not only a fundamental human right. Education is a solid foundation of equal and inclusive societies. Measures to build resilience and reach all learners need to understand and address the needs of the above students and to ensure that they receive comprehensive distance learning education when possible. At the same time, the definition of “presence in class” has been widened with the recent amendment of the General rules, and can now cover the situation where a child cannot be physically present in the school but can follow a distance learning programme, bearing in mind that the best interest of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions of the school that affect children.

4. Building on our own investment

The European Schools have been successfully developing the policies, knowledge, experience, and infrastructure necessary to provide pupils at home with education at a distance for some time. The start of the COVID-19 pandemic last March accelerated this development, placing distance teaching and learning at the centre of the activities of the European Schools.

The Board of Governors has supported investments in digital learning and distance teaching. This will allow the schools to get prepared for a situation when (...) vulnerable members of the school community may not participate in the teaching and learning 'on site'. (Letter from the Secretary General of 1 September 2020).

In addition to platforms such as SMS and TEAMS, there are now investments in equipment for live streaming and a budget to equip all schools with the hardware necessary for streaming. These efforts can and should benefit pupils currently at home, as distance learning would provide them with pedagogical continuity and resources that they deserve. Regular access to distance education would likewise support these pupils' well-being and academic success by allowing them to remain an active part of their school environment.

InterParents believes that under the present circumstances, it is crucial that immediate actions are taken to ensure pedagogical continuity to a growing number of students unable to attend school on site. The number of European School children with asymptomatic COVID, in forced quarantine and/or in situations of vulnerability increase day by day. At the present moment, the system cannot afford to wait.

At the same time, any crisis also brings opportunities. This pandemic situation has brought with it the opportunity for a longer-term reflection on the implementation of distance learning in our schools—its channels and practices, of course, but also its of application to novel situations. Such a reflection would not only improve the situation of children not present on site for justified reasons but may also contribute to a more systematic and harmonised approach to pedagogical strategy in the schools.

5. Solutions Foreseen

Short term decisions

Article 26a of the General Rules, which entered into force on 1 September 2020, already allows distance teaching to be organized in order to educate children in the public interest, based on the decision of the Director.

This proposal foresees the immediate implementation of Article 26a of the General Rules by directors to address the situation of children not physically present in school but can follow a program of distance learning.

These students would not be considered absent but regularly attending classes for the purpose of Article 30 of the General Rules.

This implementation should be built on the recommendations on distance learning from the Central Office and the COVID-19 Task-force, and should include:

1. the systematic use of TEAMS or SMS for communication, assignment management and file sharing for all classes at the school;
2. regular personal contact between the pupil and each teacher at a frequency appropriate to the year level and subject;
3. regular use of TEAMS or a similar video conferencing tool to bring children into the classroom for lectures or discussions as suits the format and content of the class.

Medium term decisions

This proposal seeks a dedicated chapter in the *Distance Teaching and Learning Policy for European Schools* (2020-09-D-10-en-1) on the provision distance education to individual pupils not *in situ*. Given the urgency of the situation, the schools should be instructed to implement the measures laid out in the policy by end December 2020. Schools should likewise receive the necessary means to do so.

Long term decisions

InterParents asks the JTC to instruct the Pedagogical Reform Task Force in close conjunction with and supported by the IT Pedagogical Working Group to continue to reflect on a longer-term strategy for distance learning. InterParents considers that the involvement of teachers, parents and students is very much welcome, and would enable the system to benefit from their experience on distance learning in Spring 2020. The involvement of experts is also highly recommended.

6. Proposal

The JTC is invited to give a favorable opinion on:

- 1) The immediate implementation of a distance learning solution in accordance with Article 26a of the general rules, fulfilling the requirements laid out above, for children not present at the school for justified reasons but able to attend class.
- 2) The inclusion of a section in the *Distance Teaching and Learning Policy for European Schools* (2020-09-D-10-en-1) catering to individuals not able to be *in situ*. Schools will be instructed to roll out measures proposed in the policy by end December 2020 at latest.
- 3) To instruct the Pedagogical Reform Task force in close cooperation with and supported by the IT Pedagogical Working Group to reflect on the necessary pedagogical reforms that could enable the European Schools to take advantage of the investment made, and strides taken, in distance learning, and to bring a report and possible proposal for further development back by October 2021.