

1. Purpose

This policy outlines the procedures for closing a class due to staffing shortages while prioritising the safety, well-being, and continued learning of our pupils. It also ensures that the rights of the child, including their right to education, inclusion, and participation, are upheld in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Northern Ireland Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Framework.

2. Rationale

In a special school setting, the consistent presence of trained staff is essential to maintaining a safe, structured, and supportive learning environment. If staffing levels fall below a safe threshold due to unforeseen circumstances (e.g. illness, emergency leave, recruitment challenges), the school may be required to close a class as a last resort. Every effort will be made to prevent class closures through internal staffing adjustments and temporary support measures.

In line with **Article 28** of the UNCRC, every child has the right to education. Furthermore, Article 23 states that children with disabilities have the right to special care and support to ensure they live full and independent lives. This policy aligns with Northern Ireland's Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005 (SEND O), which enshrines the rights of children with additional needs to be educated in an inclusive environment wherever possible.

Our school is committed to rightful presence and inclusion, ensuring that all pupils have equal opportunities to participate in education. **Class closures will only occur when necessary**, and **we will work to minimise** the impact on pupils' learning and well-being.

3. Criteria for Class Closure

A class may be closed when:

- The number of available staff does not meet the required staff-to-pupil ratio for safe supervision and learning, in accordance with Education Authority (EA) guidance.
- There are no available cover staff, including internal redeployment.
- The needs of pupils (medical, behavioural, or learning) cannot be met safely with the available staff.
- Closure is deemed the safest option following a risk assessment by senior leadership.

Every effort will be made to uphold the child's right to be included in education, in line with the SEND Code of Practice for Northern Ireland (2018), by exploring alternative arrangements that allow them to continue learning in a way that meets their individual needs.

4. Decision-Making Process

- **Risk Assessment** – The school's senior leadership team (SLT) will assess staffing levels and the impact on pupil safety and learning.
- **Consultation** – The SLT will consult with relevant stakeholders, including the Education Authority (EA), the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI), and, where appropriate, the Board of Governors.
- **Parent/Carer Notification** – Families will be informed as soon as possible via multiple communication channels (e.g. phone, email, school website).
- **Transport Providers** – If necessary, transport services will be notified of the change.
- **Review and Reopening** – The SLT will review the situation regularly and communicate updates to families.

5. Alternative Learning Arrangements

Due to the complex needs and age range of our pupils, remote learning must be tailored to individual capabilities and family circumstances. The school remains committed to inclusive education, ensuring that each child receives meaningful opportunities to engage in learning despite physical absence from the school environment.

The following measures will be implemented where appropriate and if possible:

a. Home Learning Support

Broadening horizons for all to grow, learn and achieve together.

- Learning Packs – Printed resources, sensory activities, and communication aids sent home for pupils who benefit from hands-on learning.
- Personalised Guidance – Individualised learning goals provided to parents/carers based on the child's Statement of Special Educational Needs.

b. Digital and Virtual Support

- Video Sessions – Where suitable, short virtual check-ins with familiar staff for communication and engagement.
- Pre-Recorded Resources – Staff may share recorded sensory stories, Makaton sign videos, or adapted instructional videos.
- Use of Assistive Technology – Pupils who use AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) devices may receive virtual guidance on continued usage at home.

c. Well-being and Parent Support

- Regular Check-ins – The school will maintain regular contact with families to offer support, advice, and reassurance.
- Signposting to External Services – Where necessary, families will be directed to EA support services, local health and social care trusts, and other relevant SEND support organisations.

6. Reopening Considerations

Class reopening will be prioritised as soon as staffing levels return to a safe level. Families will be informed promptly, and a transition plan will be in place for pupils who may struggle with changes in routine.

7. Commitment to Inclusion & Rightful Presence

Our school is committed to rightful presence, ensuring that every child is valued as an integral part of our school community. Class closure decisions will always be made with the best interests of the child (Article 3, UNCRC) at the forefront. We acknowledge that education is not just about access but about meaningful participation, and we will make every effort to ensure that all pupils continue to belong, engage, and thrive during periods of disruption.

This policy aligns with:

- The Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005 (SENDO)
- The SEND Code of Practice for Northern Ireland (2018)
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- The Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) Inclusion Policy

8. Monitoring & Review

This policy will be reviewed regularly to ensure it remains effective and responsive to the needs of the school community. Feedback from staff, parents, and external partners will be considered in future revisions.