

There are particular challenges and rewards in leading a special school through a pandemic. This article looks at how the staff and pupils of St Paul's, a special school in Cork, adjusted to the events and found support from the wider school community. It shows the benefits of technologies both new and old, and the importance of clear communication.

Since Covid-19 emerged it seems to be all about numbers, so I will start with the number twelve. Twelve is not a bad number and certainly better than thirteen or higher. The number twelve that I refer to here is twelve wonderful pupils in St Paul's who did not return to school on Monday 31 August, because of Covid-19. Thankfully neither they nor their family members had Covid-19 nor any symptom of it. Their parents and guardians just did not want to take a chance, which was entirely understandable.

St Paul's is a special school, of which I am very privileged to be principal. It caters for ninety-six pupils aged four to eighteen who come from all over Cork city and county. There are seven classes for children with a moderate intellectual disability, and eight classes for pupils with a severe or profound intellectual disability. Many of the pupils have additional needs: for example, thirty-one children are also wheelchair users, fourteen are peg fed, and five have life-limiting conditions. Some children also have hearing or visual impairments, mobility issues, or complex medical issues. Considering the challenges that all these children face on a normal day, the fact that all ninety-six have remained safe and well throughout the pandemic is a triumph in itself.

### Challenges of shutdown

March 12th (another twelve) was a dark day for all in the educational community. Knowing how much the children truly love coming to school, and how much the families relied upon it, we were better off not realising just how long this shutdown would last. Traditionally our families dread Christmas holidays, Easter holidays, and summer holidays – any holidays, really, as there is so little support for them. Now they were faced with weeks of 'holidays' looming and no certainty of return.

The families lost not only the educational support from the special school but also support from the wider school community: transport, canteen, respite, and clubs. Each of these may be everyday

# The Pandemic from a Special Schools Point of View

A Snapshot from a different view



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occurrences for mainstream pupils, but for our pupils, these are people and places where they are accepted and respected, where they can be themselves. Society has not yet developed enough for that to happen regularly outside of these safe environments.

St Paul's is also the main contact point for the pupils and the multidisciplinary team. Every pupil in the school needs consistent access to at least one of the following: nurses, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and psychologists. Their expertise enables our children to function without pain, to communicate basic needs, to move with greater ease, to develop daily life skills, and to try to regulate their challenging behaviour. Suddenly these supports were also absent.

### Importance of communication

As a special school, what could we now provide? Like all schools, we wanted the families to know that the lines of communication would remain open. The families had to know that we were there and that they were not alone. Communication would be key.

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For me as principal, communication to the staff of St Paul's would also be key. The school staff consists of a caretaker, secretary, thirty-five SNAs, fifteen class teachers, one part-time teacher, an administrative deputy, and me: fifty-five in total. Their reaction to the shutdown was one of despair and bewilderment, but also determination that the priority would be to reach the children.

Teachers and SNAs communicated with their pupils predominantly through their families – mostly mothers. This was done in a myriad of ways: email, Seesaw, Zoom, WhatsApp, and the old-fashioned but reliable post and telephone. All families were asked their preferred method of communication. They were also asked if they wanted to become involved in the remote learning; some agreed, while others deferred but knew how to connect with us if required.

From the outset, remote learning was going to be our greatest challenge. In a classroom environment, the majority of our pupils find it difficult to attend to any lesson longer than 20 minutes. To do so via a screen would create an even bigger challenge.

The teachers quickly manoeuvred around this obstacle with the support of their SNAs. As the class sizes ranged from six to eight pupils, some of the fifteen classes could manage a class Zoom, Seesaw, or WhatsApp lesson; most could not. The teachers reduced the numbers participating to enable every child to benefit and held a few sessions every day. All online classes were also attended by at least one family member, again usually a mother.

For pupils who did not benefit from remote learning or have access to it, sensory packages were posted or, in some cases when restrictions eased, delivered to the door. It might have been home-made sensory stories, an item borrowed from the school, or a collection of gizmos from the teacher's or SNA's home, but whatever it was, if it brightened the child's day, then

the objective was achieved. We also have siblings in the school, so in some cases it was double the fun.

Communication continued to be the key, particularly as time moved on and it looked like the school would not open before the summer. If a parent wanted to express their frustration at the unfairness of it all, we were there. If they wanted to share their worry about a new behaviour, we were there. If they wanted to champion their child's new achievement, we were there. And of course, if they did not want any communication whatsoever, that was fine too, once they knew that if they changed their minds, we were there.

A lot of promises were made about July education or provision but were poorly thought out and gave many families more stress than relief. Families who requested assistance during July received it. I only hope it will be offered to everyone again next year.

### Sources of support

Throughout the shutdown, staff remained a tremendous support to each other and to me. I had regular Zoom meetings with class teams of three or four people, rather than with the whole staff. This format worked well for us, as everyone had a chance to speak and to listen. Ideas that worked were shared on Google Drive, and my number was available to all for contact at any time. An SNA set up a 'Giggles' group on WhatsApp for all staff to share happy, upbeat stories, jokes, or memes. This proved a great success and remains to this day.

The school Facebook page was a jovial addition to St Paul's online families support network. It was so lovely to see videos of the pupils enjoying the sunshine or mastering a skill, and even better for everyone to acknowledge it. We started fundraising for a new school bus in December 2019. We needed to raise €75,000 for a wheelchair-accessible bus. By March we had raised €26,715 due to the valiant and creative efforts of families, staff, and friends of the school. I had thought it would be on hold during the pandemic, but how wrong I was. When we returned on 31 August, we had raised €66,906, which is a phenomenal amount of money when the general public had so many other things to worry about.

Looking back, I spent the last five months fluctuating between concern and confidence. As principal of a special school, in some ways I felt we were at an advantage, with much smaller numbers than mainstream, but at a disadvantage, with up to four adults in smallish rooms. I fretted that the guidelines, when they were published, were not specific enough for special schools, but I felt reassured that we had a full-time school nurse on the premises. As the pupil population were cocooning and would return safe, I worried that staff would feel responsible if Covid-19 got through the doors.

The lead-up to reopening the school was frantic. Board of management meetings were frequent and fastidious. Checklists were ticked, dated, amended, ticked again, dated again. The work done by the school caretaker

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and the admin deputy was remarkable. For a special school with so many vulnerable children, the pressure was truly enormous. But the mantra for staff was communication and support. I practised what I preached.

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I was so grateful to receive the support from the staff, the board of management, and the wonderful group of Cork Special School Principals. We speak the same language, and never before did we lean so much on each other. Questions and concerns were also answered by the IPPN (Irish Primary Principals' Network), CPSMA (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association), and NABMSE (National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education). These education stakeholders were a vital resource for me and continue to be so. It all helps.

Without a shadow of a doubt, though, the greatest remedy for the pandemic was and continues to be the children. Since March, their parents and guardians repeatedly said they were amazed at how well they were managing. Many revelled in having all family members at home and to themselves. The testament to how resilient they truly are was their return to school. The building was familiar yet changed; staff were the same yet different; routines were recognisable yet altered. But again they coped, again they adapted, and again they kept smiling, and will keep doing so, like all children do. We too adapt and cope and keep smiling, as these children are our number one, the most important number of all.

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#### Exploring how to teach the wonders of the seashore



Pre-service teachers from Mary Immaculate College Limerick join Dr Noirin Burke on Grattan beach in Galway, where she introduces them to teaching children about the wonders of the sea-shore. Dr Burke is part of the Explorers Educational Programme. Photo Anne Dolan.