



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
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Northern Secretary:
Gerry Murphy

GM/CMcD

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Mr Peter Weir
Education Minister
Room 207
Parliament Buildings
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Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Dear Minister

I hope this letter finds you well. I write on behalf of the Northern Committee of the INTO following increased speculation regarding a possible early re-opening of schools. I understand your Department has begun actively preparing for schools re-opening, I refer to your response to a question from Justin McNulty MLA at the Education Committee on the 15th of April 2020. The Northern Committee would like to remind you re-opening schools prior to September would be out of step with what teachers were given to believe would be the situation. Current wide-spread speculation of a possible earlier return is now adding further to the already considerable pressure that school leaders and teachers are enduring as they attempt to manage their way through this crisis.

The First Minister was reported by the BBC on March 18th, 2020 stating school closures would last "into the summer" which was qualified further by her, as reported by the Newsletter, on the same date "to take us beyond the natural break for the summer". It is my understanding and I believe the understanding of every teacher in the land that "break for the summer" in this context means the last day of June. INTO strongly advises against the opening of schools prior to September 2020 and urges the Department to publicly clarify what the Department's position is in regard to this issue.

It is of course perfectly normal that your Department would be considering how, given a prolonged exceptional closure, such as we are currently experiencing, a managed transition to a future safe re-opening of schools would be facilitated. The INTO believes that the Department would be greatly assisted in this work by engaging with INTO and possibly others to arrive at an agreed transitioning plan to enable the re-opening of schools at such a time. Given that, the First Minister highlighted, the "strong possibility", during an interview

with Good Morning Ulster on the 16th of April 2020, of a second surge in the Covid-19 virus later in the year. We believe the following issues should be central to any preparations your Department is considering.

- The need to ensure that prior to any proposed re-opening of schools, comprehensive testing and contact tracing systems are put in place across the school system to contain future outbreaks of Covid-19 and provide reassurance and protection for teaching and support staff.
- The development of agreed guidance to inform school leaders and teachers in deciding how many children and young people a school can safely accommodate in line with PHA guidance and social distancing norms.
- The provision of enhanced cleaning services for schools.
- How teachers who are self-isolating, those who are pregnant or suffering with underlying health conditions and those with caring responsibilities which include persons suffering underlying health conditions are to be accommodated during any managed re-opening of schools.
- How the Department plans to ensure that schools have access to the necessary and appropriate supplies of PPE, despite the Permanent Secretary's remarks to the Education Committee on 15th of April 2020 in regard to special schools.
- What steps are the Department taking to learn from the experience of other countries which have begun to re-open schools following a Covid-19 prolonged closure.

The Northern Committee are keen to ensure that teachers can be confident when they are directed to return to school on a full-time basis that their return will be to working environments where every precaution and practical step has been taken to protect both themselves and their pupils from Covid-19. The Committee seeks firm reassurance that such a move is not made prematurely to re-open and then face a second period of enforced closure which would only compound an already very dire situation. I can assure you that the Committee and the entire INTO membership are up for the challenges of re-starting the formal school system but expect that their views will be taken account of and their concerns addressed. We remain available to assist your Department in taking forward structured and agreed preparations for the re-opening of schools.

Yours sincerely



GERRY MURPHY
Northern Secretary

cc Derek Baker Permanent Secretary, DE
 Mark Bailey Director Workforce, DE