

Minister Peter Weir, MLA

Minister for Education

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Future Reopening of Schools

May 4 2020

Dear Minister

We write collectively as the British and Irish Group of Teacher Unions (BIGTU) with regard to the issue of schools reopening across the 4 jurisdictions of the UK and that of the Republic of Ireland, following an end to lockdown arrangements in all our countries.

Collectively BIGTU represents almost one million education practitioners and staff, all of whom are committed to the children and young people we teach and support, as evidenced by the efforts which have been made by our members to support provision for children of key workers and also remote learning for others during lockdown. We hope, therefore, that you might give some consideration to our views, as the voice of the profession.

We wish to urge significant caution in any consideration of reopening schools.

Firstly, we would highlight the very real risk of creating a spike in the transmission of the virus by a premature opening of schools. We are convinced by the experience of other systems that a critical tool in preventing a surge of infection is an established capacity to “test trace and isolate” and we would argue that reopening schools before such a regime is in place, would be catastrophic to the rate of infection.

Secondly, it is clear to all that schools can only reopen and operate safely if there are significant operational changes in place to ensure effective social distancing, strong hygiene routines linked to thorough cleansing practices, appropriate PPE available where required, and ongoing risk assessments in place to monitor operations. This will mean that as schools cannot reopen as normal, a phased return will be required and priorities established around attendance, which is likely to be part time for most pupils.

As part of the establishing of priorities we would stress a third point – which is the need to consider equity. We recognise that children from poor and challenged backgrounds and vulnerable children will inevitably require significant additional support as we move slowly back to a more settled situation. We need to recognise, also, that potentially all children will have suffered a level of trauma as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic and we would urge that the initial focus when schools reopen, in any capacity, should be on the health, well-being, and emotional resilience of our students.

BIGTU also includes teacher trade unions which represent teaching, research and senior administrative staff in Higher and Further Education institutions in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Although many of the issues of concern to staff in these institutions are represented in the foregoing we do recognise that, at governmental level, it is common for matters pertaining to Higher Education and Further Education to be dealt with by a separate government departments. For this reason, and to facilitate a comprehensive response to the concerns of our members in all of the sectors, we will set out our submissions regarding Higher Education and Further Education separately in the attached addendum.

Finally, we would underline the strong commitment of the teaching profession referred to above. At the same time, we would assert the importance of Government taking teachers with them as we continue our societal response to COVID 19. That means sharing all available data informing decision making, demonstrating a commitment to the health and safety not only of pupils but of teachers and support staff also (recognising that many of them may well have suffered stress and trauma as well as their pupils), and above all listening to and respecting their collective expertise as practitioners by engaging meaningfully with their professional associations before arriving at decisions.

Thank you for your attention to this letter. We remain open to further dialogue and country specific bilateral engagement.

Yours sincerely

Jacque White, General Secretary UTU

John Boyle, General Secretary INTO

Patrick Roach, General Secretary NASUWT

Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretary NEU

Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretary NEU

Larry Flanagan, General Secretary EIS

Seamus Searson, General Secretary SSTA

Jo Grady, General Secretary UCU

Kieran Christie, General Secretary ASTI

Joan Donegan, General Secretary IFUT

John Mac Gabhann, General Secretary TUI