



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
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Northern Secretary:
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GM/CMcD

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Mr Peter Weir MLA
Minister of Education
Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgael
Bangor
BT19 7PR

Dear Minister Weir

I write following the issuing of a communication to schools by your Department announcing a further Covid-19 related initiative.

Wednesday evening after the end of the working day, an email informed Principals that DE has accepted an offer from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency to provide home testing kits for children who display Covid-19 symptoms in school and whose parents are unable to transport them to one of the established Covid-19 test centres for a test.

This was introduced without any consultation with INTO, something which now appears to be the Department of Education's standard modus operandi as this pandemic has unfolded. The email of Wednesday evening was then followed up by a second email at 18.34 explaining that the earlier email from the Department of Health and Social Care to school principals was sent erroneously. Neither of these emails provided principals with any real clarity as to what is to be expected of the school in the administration of this initiative. All both have succeeded in doing is to add to the considerable stress being felt by our principal members.

INTO has received a large number of queries from principal members in regard to this matter. We are unable to provide accurate answers to these questions due to the inept and ineffectual manner in which this matter has been introduced without any meaningful guidance. Had there been consultation, INTO would have been willing to assist DE in correctly managing and developing this process. Please see below a sample of the types of inquiries we are currently receiving, the answers to which I suggest would be useful in assisting to formulate guidance for principals.

- **Why was Guidance not prepared and on the DE website to support principals have prior to the announcement of this initiative?**
- **Can you confirm that schools are not expected to become a new channel for access to Track and Trace?**

- Are schools expected to register which child has received a test and if so with whom?
- Is there an expectation that Principals/schools will be interacting with Dept. of Health and or PHA re-testing?
- How are completed tests to be returned to the testing agency?
- Please outline the dates for the essential training package to be delivered to school principals concerning the handling of potentially hazardous material and when they can expect to receive the additional PPE that will be required should it be DEs intention to have testing kits returned to school for onward transit to the testing agency? (INTO acknowledges, the retraction by The Department of Health, which negates some of these questions but highlights the lack of due consideration communication with principals).
- Guidance as to how test kits are to be replenished. In England this is still being developed yet the limited information provided to principals here, disregarding the misleading DHSC links, does not exist despite a start date for the initiative, when will this be resolved?
- Are parents able to demand a test kit from the school, the “guidance” is unclear on this point?
- The introduction of this initiative appears out of step with the DE Re-start Guidance are DE changing their approach, again, to re-start?
- There is no information on the practical demands of managing the practicalities of the initiative e.g. DfE guidance specifies “Kits should be stored securely at ambient room temperature (5-22°C)”. Are DE aware of how school heating systems work, of the responsibility that goes with this directive.
- Are principals expected to ‘means test’ in regard to parents’ ability to travel?
- Are principals to be held liable if outdated heating systems and poorly insulated buildings make it impossible to keep the kits within the defined temperature range?

The questions above are just some of those we are receiving, they are indicative of the increasing stress being experienced by the teaching profession as a whole and principals especially. Minister, it appears you are failing to balance the need for schools to remain open against the need to ensure the health and safety of the staff essential to delivering this objective. The continual dropping of updated and new guidance, after hours, along with new initiatives which have been produced by officials some miles behind the front lines, is contributing to further increased levels of stress and anxiety which will inevitably be reflected in increased absenteeism going forward.

Minister after 10 days of announcing funding was to be allocated and 14 days of many schools being open, principals can finally see that money will be reaching their schools. INTO welcomes that the specific challenge of funding substitute teachers, for immediate covid-19 related absence or working from home has been clarified. The substitute fund will be based on need as identified by schools. This need will obviously vary amongst schools depending on the pre-existing health conditions of staff and the impact of COVID-19 related illness on staff and what is being proposed is flexible enough to cope with that. INTO is however concerned that the same degree of thought appears not to have gone into the planning for how the allocation of monies for restart and PPE has been determined.

In his letter, Seamus Wade, Director of Finance at EANI, states that “Individual allocations to schools have been calculated on the basis of pupil numbers”. This statement raises a number of concerns for us as a

professional organization supporting our principals and teachers in managing the reopening and maintaining of safe schools.

By using 'pupil numbers' as the key factor in determining the financial allocation to a school, the particular needs of schools, the particular needs of the pupils and the necessary adaptations needing to be made to the learning environment have been largely dismissed. This approach is too simplistic and fails to account for an increase in need should a school suffer from a spike in cases and it is also in conflict with the school re-start guidance.

In relation to PPE, the guidance asserts that social distancing is not be possible in early years and acknowledges that classroom size and pupil/staff numbers in each class will hinder adequate social distancing yet the funding allocations being based on overall pupil numbers do not reflect this. Nursery schools and the foundation stage in primary schools both require the provision of a significant amount of personal care where PPE will be necessary. PPE is recommended within the guidance for the administration of medication, for pupil hygiene and personal care, behavioral need e.g. spitting. The 'pupil numbers' formula does not take into account these factors at all.

With limited funding available to the Department of Education and the Education Authority the most effective use of the limited funds would be to meet identified need. A school sitting with a significant PPE budget due to large pupil numbers in an area that is neither experiencing COVID-19 cases and is able to implement other mitigating factors is frankly a wasted resource.

The re-start funding again calculated on pupil numbers, disregards the actual needs of the school. A post primary school on split site with mobiles, old buildings, narrow corridors, limited ventilation with pupil numbers of 600 will receive the same amount of money as a newer build with space for a one-way system, large dining hall, etc. INTO suggests that when further tranches of funding are being allocated that the following factors should be considered in addition to pupil numbers:

- where an increased potential risk is evident in a locality that financial support should be allocated to schools in that locality to pre-empt the virus, to prevent an outbreak and be available to contain an outbreak should it occur;
- where a school building is identified as being a Covid-19 vulnerable/sympathetic environment, funding should be additional to make adaptations, and this will also require adjustments to procurement and planning regulations;
- where high levels of pupil need exist (for medical, behavioral, or dependency) increased financial support must be available.

INTO appreciates that DE is attempting to get financial support to schools as quickly as it can but a more sophisticated approach than that currently being employed is needed to ensure schools receive the actual support they require and to ensure best value is achieved for the limited funds available.

In addition to supporting our members, INTO is also as a professional organisation supporting education. The Department and the Education Authority, by not consulting and seeking advice from INTO and others representing front line workers, have missed another opportunity to more effectively target support with scarce financial resources. Many of our schools will continue to struggle to meet the demands of sustaining a low risk learning environment in the medium to longer term if the funding model is not revisited.

We still await the funding breakdown for school wellbeing and special educational needs. The funding allocation for Special Schools is not contained within the schools list. INTO would like to know how our special schools are being supported in financial terms especially in accessing the funding that they require. It would also be helpful to know how much of the allocated £42 million is being held in reserve.

INTO strongly suggests that DE now pause and evaluate their response to Covid-19 to date. This would allow and indeed support a space to engage in a genuine and meaningful consultation with the recognised trade unions. Teachers and principals are rapidly losing confidence in the capacity of your Department to effectively manage the regional response to Covid-19, if this issue is not addressed it will lead to further problems in the time ahead.

Your officials have sought a meeting later in the month on September 23rd with the "Consultation Group" and I have sought, on behalf of INTO, a meeting with the Permanent Secretary. I sincerely hope these meetings reveal a change in attitude on behalf of DE which will translate into a more inclusive and co-operative approach going forward. INTO believes that is in everyone's interests and we remain firmly committed to working with the Department to refine and improve the systemic handling of the pandemic.

Our members, the principals, and teachers, are keeping the schools open as safely as possible; they are leading from the front. DE must show them the respect they deserve and recognise that INTO gives voice to their concerns and provides a channel to access their knowledge and expertise. The situation we find ourselves in is too serious not to exploit all available talents.

Yours sincerely



GERRY MURPHY
Northern Secretary

cc Mr Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary