



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

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Minister Norma Foley, TD, Minister for Education,
and
Minister Josepha Madigan, Minister of State at the Department of Education
Minister for Education, Department for Education,
Marlborough Street,
Dublin 1.
D01 RC96

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minister@education.gov.ie

Dear Minister Foley and Minister Madigan,

First of all I wish to remind you that the INTO was very much to the fore throughout the first lockdown working very constructively and creatively with your Department as we strived to ensure that our most vulnerable pupils received school meals, the support of specialist teachers and benefitted from the very successful Summer programmes. Since then we have continued to engage with your officials in a constructive solution-focused manner to ensure that primary and special schools reopened and remained open as safely as possible from late August to Christmas, and we appreciate the inclusive and consultative approach which has been taken by your officials. We remained available to them throughout the Christmas holidays to ensure that they and public health had any back up they required when addressing issues in schools.

In that context to say that we were shocked at the approach taken in advance of yesterday's decision to reopen special schools and special classes from next Monday would be an understatement. I wish to express my serious opposition to and dismay at the attitude taken during yesterday's very short briefing, where none of the legitimate concerns raised by the INTO and fellow stakeholders were taken on board. The announcement about reopening special education settings has been met with shock, incredulity and widespread, severe anxiety among our members. There is a clear message from teachers and principals that whilst the needs of the pupils in their care are paramount, and no one wants to deny any child their right to an appropriate education, given the current community transmission rates and worrying case numbers schools, and in particular special schools and classes, are currently not safe settings. Following the publication of the Chief Medical Officer Dr Tony Holohan's letter to Government (Jan 5, 2021) it is evident that the NPHE were completely silent on the safety of special education. These schools and classes provide education for some high-risk children and require teachers on occasion to assist in tending to intimate care needs and first aid. We were informed at this afternoon's stakeholder meeting with Public Health Doctors and your officials that NPHE were not uncomfortable with special education provision reopening face to face next Monday. We requested confirmation of this position in writing as a matter of urgency. We of course wish to continue working constructively with your Department to ensure that children with special educational needs do not regress during school closures this month, but we also have a responsibility to our members who work in and lead special schools and special classes.

This is a time of high concern for us all. We have an opportunity to deliver a sustainable and safe re-opening of special schools and settings supporting our most vulnerable children. Without taking purposeful steps at this stage, the reality will be that COVID will continue to affect the opening of special schools and the risk of significant health issues or fatalities remains, especially for the unprotected pupils and staff (and their families) with underlying conditions.

In representing INTO members, I bring the perspective of a teacher of thirty three years' experience during which time I supported pupils with the most complex of needs and their parents as a teacher and principal of a large school with a very inclusive ethos. I, along with our special education teachers and wider workforce, appreciate and have experience of the impact the closure of schools on the families of children with complex needs. INTO seeks to inform the support and protection that is planned and delivered by Department of Education for these vulnerable pupils.

In the context set out above, there are a number of key points that the INTO believes need to be prioritised for consideration:

- Context

The previous lockdown impacted many families of children and young people with complex needs physically and emotionally, in ways that are impossible for those of us not in that situation to comprehend. They have fought so that their child(ren) and family would not have to experience a lockdown and subsequent school closure again. However, these families have also informed our members that they wish to ensure that where schools remained open, they would be safe for the staff and pupils. That responsibility lies with the boards of management, principals and staff in the schools. They simply must receive adequate support from your Department especially at a time when the disease is so rampant in communities. Among children aged 5-12 years and 13-18 years, we note with concern the growth in numbers as contained in the HSPC 14-day reports with the latest (6 January 2021) showing confirmed cases in these age categories at 1,678 and 2,375, respectively.

A move forward must take the current context within the wider community into account. Special needs communities do not live in bubbles. The current crisis we find ourselves in has exhausted the mitigations that schools have implemented. At least half of our Special schools and many mainstream schools with special classes have been impacted by COVID since returning in August and we have seen many partial or whole school closures to date. Without additional mitigations this will continue.

The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in our schools, as well as the workforce must be paramount at all times. Teachers supporting pupils with complex needs know the ramifications of uncertainty; to move forward there must be a holistic approach delivered with urgency.

When the Covid-19 Response plans and resources were presented to primary and special schools last August, society was reopening and it was felt that the levels of infection and the R-rate were low. We find ourselves now facing significant rising R-rates and crisis in our health services and hospitals, with the rate of infection among the school going population rising at an alarming pace since New Year's Day. An Taoiseach stated yesterday that special education settings would reopen with additional protections. To date we have not been advised of any additional protections by you or your officials other than the fact that some more Department Inspectors will be available to support principals and public health support teams at a time when the mantra that schools are safe is continuously repeated. We believe that if special schools and special classes were to reopen next Monday that principals, teachers, non-teaching staff and pupils would be exposed to increased risks. It cannot be acceptable for this proposed reopening to continue as announced yesterday.

INTO members who work in special schools and special class settings call for consideration and commitments from DES of the following measures:

- an extension to the school closure for an extra period just to ensure that our new restrictions have passed the 14-day incubation period before we all return to the front line, with a staged reopening to commence thereafter but only in a context of clearly falling levels of Covid-19 transmission
- thorough risk assessment of school settings as special schools and special classes are a higher risk based solely upon those who are in their care. Most children with additional needs cannot socially distance, cannot wear a mask/face-covering and cannot cover their mouth when they cough or sneeze (therefore requiring physical prompts from adults).
- testing of staff and pupils prior to their return to work/school. mass testing and tracing of close contacts in special educational settings.
- prioritisation for teachers in special schools in relation to the Covid-19 vaccine staggered attendance of pupils to reduce the number of children and adults from different households/bubbles mixing in the special class setting
- high quality Personal Protective Equipment for ALL teachers in ALL special schools and special classes
- protection for teachers in special schools and special classes who are pregnant as a number of teachers have contacted INTO stating that their doctors advised that they should not return to work (even some teachers who have not yet reached the 24th week of pregnancy).
- provision/prioritisation of childcare for parents who are teachers in special schools and special classes
- the arrangements for school transport for children with SEN to be assessed and approved to meet the safety needs of passengers
- cancellation of shared transport to avoid children mixing with students from other schools
- protection for teachers who are in the high risk category of health and for those who are aged 60 and over.
- greater autonomy for school boards to make decisions around closures due to reduced staffing levels as a result of Covid-19.
- A public awareness campaign for parents prior to the reopening of special schools and special classes

As we enter this phase of Level 5 restrictions with no certainty about how long they will last, decisive action now by the Department of Education, with the support of the Department of Health, could ensure the highly trained staff that support our most vulnerable pupils are able to provide a safe, sustainable education environment.

We have sought an urgent meeting with you and your officials tomorrow to try to reach an acceptable, workable solution to these difficulties.

Yours sincerely,

John Boyle
General Secretary
Irish National Teachers' Organisation