

GM/CMcD

22<sup>nd</sup> September 2020

Ms Olive Macleod  
Interim Chief Executive PHA  
Public Health Agency  
Linenhall Street Unit  
12-22 Linenhall Street  
Belfast  
BT2 8BS

Dear Ms Macleod

I write on behalf of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation [INTO], the largest teachers' union on the island of Ireland, in an attempt to determine the level of consistency regarding the responses to positive cases of Coronavirus in schools and advice being provided by your organisation to school leaders which they are then implementing. INTO is seeking assurance that the safety of our members and of the entire school community remains PHA's priority and has not been superseded by a political imperative which demands that schools be kept open at all costs.

Since the initial outbreak of COVID-19, schools have been directed by two specific guidance documents produced by DE; [Reopening School Guidance](#) (August 2020) and [Guidance to support safe working in educational settings](#) (June 2020). Both of these documents highlight how risks are to be mitigated and how safe practice in schools can be achieved. In addition to advising around measures which include face coverings and social distancing, the crucial, overarching, theme to all of the guidance is the creation of protective bubbles as the key mitigating factor of risk within primary and post-primary schools.

Guidance to Support Safe Working in Educational Settings specifically states, with regard to the recognition of an outbreak, that... *"it is important that potential clusters of cases are identified early so immediate steps can be taken to prevent spread. If two or more children and/or staff are positive for COVID-19 within a 14- day period, the head teacher or person in charge of the setting must contact the Public Health Agency (PHA). A clinical risk assessment will be undertaken by the PHA duty officer. The PHA duty room officer will advise you of what further action to take."*

We, at INTO, are inundated daily with genuine concerns and queries from members regarding what appears to be some very obvious inconsistencies in PHA advice being provided to their schools. It is extremely critical, I am sure you will agree, in these times, that all school communities are confident their schools are safe environments and that all necessary precautions possible are being taken when a positive COVID-19 case is identified. INTO have, and are, taking very seriously the sharing with our members, advice emanating from PHA, Track & Trace and DE. However, the scenarios outlined below, arising from members who have subsequently sought INTO advice having first contacted your organisation for advice, appear to perfectly illustrate inconsistencies and constant lack of transparency which we request is addressed as a matter of urgency.

**Case study 1:** Since reopening, a post-primary school has had three positive COVID-19 cases over the last number of weeks. The principal sought and received PHA advice and the following actions were taken on foot of that advice. In the:

- first case, the entire year group was sent home as well as the teaching staff to self-isolate for 14 days;

- second case, the entire year group was sent home to self-isolate for 14 days, but the teachers instructed to stay in school;
- third case, (in a year eight group that operates bubbles) the class was sent home but not the teachers.

The inconsistency was highlighted and queried by an INTO member who was informed by the principal that the PHA officer did not consider it to be a cluster. In this instance, INTO must assume a risk assessment was not considered necessary by the PHA. This is not in line with DE guidance.

**Case study 2:** A primary school principal had a pupil test positive for COVID-19 in a ‘bubbled’ classroom and has only sent home the pupils sitting directly beside and behind the pupil. The teacher and remaining pupils continue to be in school. The principal has claimed to be acting on PHA advice.

**Case study 3:** A post-primary school principal has had a pupil test positive for COVID-19. Only the pupils sitting around the pupil have been told to self-isolate the rest of the class and their parents have not been informed that there has been a positive case in their bubble. The principal claims their actions to be fully compliant with PHA advice.

**Case study 4:** A special school has had a positive case and the class in which the pupil is located [organised in a bubble] has been told to self-isolate on foot of advice received from PHA. However, this bubble also extends onto school transport, the children from outside the original bubble, who also travel on the same bus, have not been instructed to self-isolate. In the DE guidance concerning Transport, Supplementary Guidance for Re-opening – Special Schools (August 2020) it is clear that those children, beyond the original bubble who shared the transport should have been instructed to self-isolate. It is also worth noting that children and young people with special needs will not be wearing face coverings on transport and the roof vents, on the school bus, only provide minimal ventilation thereby increasing the risk of infection.

**Case study 5:** A post-primary school has a confirmed positive COVID-19 case. The principal has informed INTO that the PHA advised that the whole group did not need to self-isolate. The school was asked to trace who the pupil had been in contact with and instruct them to self-isolate. Track and Trace now appears to be being carried out by the school, on foot of instruction from PHA. Two teachers and a classroom assistant have since been identified as being in close contact and the school have advised them that PHA have said, they only need to have a test and if the result is negative, they can come back to school. This is in direct conflict to the Track and Trace guidance:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-testing-and-contact-tracing>

It is essential that informed and unambiguous safe direction is given that is not open to re-interpretation by principals. In light of this, can PHA please clarify the following points for INTO:

- 1. Are PHA officers/call handlers following an agreed script which includes a set of standard responses to a list of common questions arising from school queries?**
- 2. INTO requests a copy of the script [should one exist] from which PHA officers/call handlers are operating.**
- 3. What steps are PHA managers taking to ensure that advice given in telephone conversations with school leaders is consistent with the published advice from your organisation and the other bodies who are also providing advice to schools?**
- 4. Does PHA have a policy of putting in writing the advice it provides to school leaders who telephone?**  
This would go some way to reassuring staff and families that the safest measures are being followed as opposed to what appears to be a focus on keeping classes/schools open despite risks.
- 5. How many schools have had positive cases since reopening? How many schools have been identified as having a ‘cluster’ and have subsequently been subject to a PHA risk assessment?**
- 6. Will the PHA consider emailing updates on the number of COVID-19 cases identified in educational settings so this information can be shared with our members?**
- 7. What has been the effectiveness of how successful the ‘protective bubble’ strategy has been in schools? Where there has been a positive case identified in a class, in how many cases have other members of that bubble subsequently tested positive?**

**8. Will the PHA consider developing a more effective and user-friendly presentational approach on their website to highlight changes to guidance and directives ensuring school leaders find them easier to discover and implement?**

Updates on the website can be easily missed, an example concerns the "15-minute rule" which previously referred to a 2m distance being breached. The current advice makes no reference to 2m but "close contact". Please clarify what the PHA understands "close contact" to mean in an educational setting? INTO would consider a classroom containing pupils, teachers and support staff to be an environment where "close contact" takes place.

**9. Do the PHA have the capacity to manage the increasing demand developing in schools for answers to COVID related questions as the school experience evolves?**

**10. Can you share with INTO from where PHA has had the authority conferred upon it to instruct principals/school leaders to undertake the work of tracing pupils?**

INTO appreciates that the PHA is under significant pressure and that the setting up of a dedicated support line for education has the potential to provide much needed additional support to already hard-pressed principals and school leaders. Your considered, but prompt response, to the concerns outlined would be greatly appreciated.

If you wish to discuss any of these matters further, please do not hesitate to get in contact.

Yours sincerely



**GERRY MURPHY**  
Northern Secretary



**CAROLINE MCCARTHY**  
Northern Committee Chairperson

cc Robin Swann  
Peter Weir  
Richard Pengelly  
Derek Baker  
Sara Long  
Chris Lyttle  
Education Committee Members  
Peter McCallion (Education Committee)