An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Resumption of Schooling Autumn 2020: Report on analysis of data from principals

Phase One – September 2020

Contents

1. Introduction

This report presents an analysis of data from the Inspectorate's advisory sessions with principals and other school leaders during the period 01 September 2020 to 25 September 2020. During this period, a total of 738 advisory sessions occurred as set out in the table below:

Sector	Number
Primary schools	533
Post-primary schools	205

The purpose of this analysis was:

- To provide an overview of the successes and challenges experienced by schools during this time
- To identify the main areas prioritised by schools for further advice and support.

This report is one of a series of three reports[1] which will be provided as part of phase one of the Inspectorate's research activity in schools during the 2020/21 school year.

As the data from the advisory visits was received and analysed in October 2020, it was provided to the School Governance Section of the Department where the findings helped to inform policy decisions.

---

[1] The other reports will be on the outcomes of focus groups with students, surveys of teachers, students and parents, and a further survey of principals.

2. Overview of the engagements with schools

2.1 Aims of advisory sessions

One of the main focuses of the Inspectorate's engagement with schools in the first term of the 2020/21 school year was on providing advice and support to principals as schools re-opened. The aims of the advisory sessions are set out in Circular 0040/2020 (P) and Circular 0041/2020 (PP). Inspectors provided advice and support to principals and school leaders in the following areas:

- Supporting the wellbeing of learners and staff
- Delivering the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year
- Establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment

2.2 Information and guidance issued to schools

Advisory sessions are informed by the suite of documents provided by the Department of Education for school management, principals and teachers to support the return to school and mediation of the curriculum in the 2020/21 school year. These documents include:

- *COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable reopening of Primary and Special Schools*
- *Supporting the Wellbeing of the School Community: Returning to School after COVID-19 School Closure*
- *Returning to School: Curriculum guidance for primary school leaders and teachers*
- *Returning to School: Guidance on learning and school programmes for post-primary school leaders and teachers*
- *Returning to School: Transition Year 2020/21*
- *Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA): Advice for management and teachers of LCA 2020/21 in Second-Level Schools and Centres for Education*

The full suite of documents provided by the Department to support schools at this time are available at the following links:
Reopening our primary and special schools:
    https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/
Reopening our post primary schools:
    https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7acad-reopening-our-post-primary-schools/

2.3 Organisation of engagements

Typically, inspectors initiated contact with schools by e-mail or phone inviting principals to avail of an advisory session. Schools also had the option to request a session using the dedicated info@schoolself-evaluation.ie email address. Almost all advisory sessions during the period of this report took place by phone or using a remote digital platform such as WebEx. Advisory sessions typically lasted between one and two hours.

3. Methodology

3.1 Recording the data gathered during advisory sessions

During advisory sessions, inspectors engaged in discussions with principals and other school leaders. This report reflects the views and opinions reported to inspectors by principals and school leaders during those sessions. These discussions provided the inspector with an insight into the school's context and into the successes and challenges that the school was experiencing. Following completion of each advisory session, individual inspectors recorded data for three questions in the Inspectorate's information management system (IMIS):

Questions
1) What are the successes the school is experiencing?
2) What are the challenges the school is experiencing?
3) What areas is the school prioritising for further advice and support?

For Questions 1 and 2, inspectors could input up to three short statements (each with a maximum of 150 characters). This facilitated the identification and analysis of the successes and challenges. Question 3 had a pre-populated dropdown menu and also allowed for the recording of open responses under 'Other'.

3.2 Analysis of data

Ahead of the main data analysis, two trial analyses using pilot data were undertaken. In the first round of coding, successes and challenges were divided into broad areas as outlined in the table below:

Data classification system used in the first layer of analysis
Establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment
Delivering the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year
Supporting the wellbeing of learners and staff
Other

The data was exported from IMIS on 26 September. All data entered by inspectors up to midnight on 25 September was included within this analysis.

A team of five inspectors was assigned to the data analysis. Initial training was provided, and daily meetings and discussion occurred as the week progressed. This ensured that analysis was consistent. A system to ensure reliability and consistency was implemented. The data was subsequently collated and reviewed.

3.3 Feedback from weekly sectoral meetings of inspectors in the regions

The team also had access to reflection sheets from the regional sectoral meetings of inspectors for the period of this report. These reflection sheets provided team members with useful collated information on the emerging trends and issues reported to inspectors. Data from reflection sheets was reviewed, considered, and used to inform the findings of this report.

3.4 Limitations of the study

Although the sample in this study is very large, the source of information is limited to principals and other school leaders. The views of other members of school communities such as teachers, parents and learners may be different. It should also be noted that the data relates to discussions with principals at the start of the school year in September. Perspectives and priorities may well have changed in light of evolving circumstances since then.

4. Core Messages

The core messages for the system are captured under the following three headings:

1) Establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment
2) Delivering the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year
3) Supporting the well-being of learners and staff

Core messages from these three areas involve both successes and challenges for schools and for the system generally.

4.1 Establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment

Successes

Almost all primary and post-primary principals reported successes relating to the safe re-opening of their schools. This is understandable given that this report is drawing on data from the month of September; establishing a safe learning and working environment was a central priority for schools in this period. Common responses across both primary and post-primary sectors referenced the very effective preparation made by schools for reopening, the removal of unnecessary clutter to facilitate cleaning, and the establishment and successful implementation of a range of routines and structures.

A number of the responses identified the supports provided by the Department of Education and other partners as a success. Typical responses in this regard referenced the Department's helpline and dedicated email address to assist schools with re-opening, the comprehensive funding package, and the range of published supports and guidance provided to enable schools to re-open safely.

Other principals identified the co-operation of staff and learners with the measures the school had in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 as a key success. These principals typically described how new protocols had become part of the day-to-day life of the school, and spoke positively of how school staff, parents and learners were supportive of the need to adhere to appropriate protective measures.

> *Observations from primary principals*
>
> - *Safe return of all pupils and smooth running of school within new guidelines. Pupils content and well settled overall.*
> - *Great preparation by all staff facilitated a very smooth transition back to school and very clear routines.*
> - *The return to school has been very positive for all pupils and staff.*

> *Observations from post-primary principals*
>
> - *Proud that students returned to a safe environment and that the school had clearly communicated their Covid Policy to the school community.*
> - *Successful planning for re-opening (reconfiguration of rooms etc.). Voluntary work undertaken by staff over summer holidays.*
> - *Greatest success is that the school is up and running for the start of the school year.*

Challenges

While the safe re-opening of schools emerged as a key success from this period, most primary principals and almost all post-primary principals reported that they were experiencing some challenges in maintaining the school as a safe environment. A significant number of responses from principals in this regard related to the practical challenges of ensuring that staff and learners adhered to physical distancing requirements. Some primary principals reported difficulties in keeping discrete bubbles and pods apart from other bubbles, groups and classes. These difficulties were also evident at post-primary level, where a greater proportion of challenges were reported around compliance. For example, a few post-primary principals highlighted issues related to the management of students whose parents were opposed to the wearing of face coverings. Updated advice on the use of face coverings issued to post-primary schools by the Department have been of assistance to schools in this regard. Another concern at post-primary level related to the implications of having to temporarily re-designate practical and general purpose rooms as classrooms.

A number of responses referenced difficulties in relation to cleaning and sanitising and the procurement process. Issues in this area included the increased financial burden experienced by schools as a result of enhanced cleaning measures, difficulties in accessing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) through the procurement process, and the quantity, quality and durability of PPE.

A small number of principals referred to difficulties in navigating and using the range of guidance provided by the Department and other government agencies. In particular, these principals described the demands caused by the need to remain abreast of updated advice, and the challenges resulting from the need to contextualise and communicate the key messages from this advice to the broader school community.

4.2 Promoting the wellbeing of the school community

Successes

Almost all primary principals and a majority of post-primary principals reported successes related to the promotion of wellbeing amongst the school community. Typical responses

in this area referenced the creation of a calm school environment, reconnecting learners with school, reconnecting learners with staff and with their friends, and settling back into school routines. Many responses praised the manner in which school communities worked together to re-open schools. Teamwork, collaboration and regular communication were reported as particularly positive features of whole-school practice. As reported by principals, school communities have been proactive and have worked together successfully to contribute positively to the wellbeing of staff and learners.

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;">

Observations from primary principals

- *Children settled, calm and delighted to be back, adapting well to new routines*

- *Support from staff and school community during lockdown and since reopening; high levels of commitment to keeping the school community safe and school*

- *The level of joy among the pupils at the return to school was overwhelming*

</div>

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;">

Observations from post-primary principals

- *Wellbeing of staff and students has been very successful through the use of induction, the work of the Covid aides and Lead Worker Representative.*

- *Wellbeing was paramount*

- *Staff collaboration; solution-oriented; Year Heads had worked in advance to identify 'at risk' students*

</div>

Challenges

Despite the notable successes in promoting wellbeing in the school community, almost all primary and post-primary principals identified challenges in relation to the promotion of wellbeing.

In particular, they reported concerns in relation to their own wellbeing and that of their staff. Increased workload for principals and school leaders, and the sustainability of their workload across the school year were highlighted. Many principals described how they had had little or no time off since March, noting that they had worked throughout the summer to prepare their school for reopening. In discussions with inspectors, principals described the extraordinary challenges of this period, citing the mental and physical impact of their significantly increased workload. In many instances, serious work-related issues, such as stress, burn-out and high levels of exhaustion, were referenced during these discussions.

Principals also frequently referred to high levels of fatigue and stress amongst staff members, particularly amongst members of senior management teams, and described the challenge involved in maintaining collegiality when interactions between staff were necessarily reduced. Relatively few principals reported challenges in the area of learner wellbeing and behaviour although some principals reported increased levels of anxiety demonstrated by a small cohort of learners, particularly those with SEN.

A frequently reported challenge related to issues around staffing. A significant proportion of responses from principals in this area referenced the challenges posed by issues such Covid-related teacher absences, the difficulty of recruiting qualified substitute teachers, and the need for school staff to have access to rapid Covid-testing.

Observations from primary principals

- *Principal felt lonely and isolated, didn't want to be pestering staff during the holidays*

- *Mental stress on the principal in the weeks prior to reopening- anxious that all would be ready and planning for different scenarios*

- *Principal fatigue, increased workload and responsibility in addressing Covid related issues and fielding calls from concerned parents.*

Observations from post-primary principals

- *Senior management are overwhelmed and firefighting everyday with regards to health and safety; no downtime during summer and constant Covid work*

- *Logistical challenges enormous and pressure and demands made of Principal and Deputy Principal unsustainable. One and a half weeks of holidays since February*

- *Senior leadership burnout, no break during school day, Lead Worker Representative hours insufficient for school this large, no summer, Covid-aide appreciated but not enough*

4.3 Delivering the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year

Successes

As the engagements took place early in the school year, many principals were understandably focused on the need to promote a safe working and learning environment, and the challenge of supporting the wellbeing of the school community. However, up to a half of primary principals and a majority of post-primary principals also identified topics

relating to teaching and learning as a key success in the period. They highlighted the use of a broad range of teaching methodologies, the use of the outdoor environment to support learning, and more frequent use of digital technologies as successes in the early period of the school year.

> *Observations from primary principals*
>
> - *Each day, each teacher conducts at least one lesson outdoors, and teachers are becoming more creative as time goes on.*
>
> - *Further developing the ICT platforms that were used during the closures and implementing them as part of the day-to-day running of the school.*
>
> - *The teachers have been proactive in reorganising how they undertake all aspects of the curriculum effectively in spite of Covid restrictions.*

> *Observations from post-primary principals*
>
> - *Staff are aware of the need to continue to use active teaching methodologies with their students, and to continue to progress digital learning*
>
> - *Innovative TY coordinator who is leading the re-imagining of the TY programme during the pandemic*
>
> - *Blended learning has become much more embedded and coherent*

Challenges

Matters relating to teaching and learning were cited as a challenge by a majority of primary and post-primary principals. Areas that were of most concern were differentiating to provide for the range of learning needs in classrooms, and addressing the gaps in learning as a result of the lengthy period of school closure.

The implementation of the curriculum was identified as an area of concern in both primary and post-primary schools. Some principals, particularly at primary level, expressed uncertainty about the school's ability to provide some aspects of the curriculum, such as Physical Education (PE) and Music. Other constraints to curriculum implementation mentioned by principals included the reduction of teaching time due to the increased attention to hygiene and sanitisation protocols, and the impact of reduced interaction and collaboration among teachers on the use of whole-school approaches. Post-primary principals highlighted the difficulties in implementing some practical aspects of subjects due to the repurposing of practical rooms to enable the school to reopen.

Of particular concern at primary level was provision for pupils with special educational needs. Issues reported by principals included the practical difficulties of ensuring the integration of pupils from special classes with pupils in mainstream classes, and the impact of the period of extended school closure on pupils with additional and complex learning needs.

Principals also expressed regret at not being able to provide the same range of extra- and co-curricular activities in the current context, and referred to the impact of this on learners' social and emotional development.

5. Areas identified where schools require further advice

The final item that inspectors enquired about in their discussions with school principals concerned areas in which the schools would benefit from support and guidance as the term progressed. Teaching and learning, followed by establishing a safe working and learning environment, assessment and wellbeing were prioritised as the main areas for further support and advice in both primary and post-primary schools.

Area of advice / support	No. of primary schools where inspectors indicated support / guidance was required	No. of post-primary schools where inspectors indicated support / guidance was required
Establishing a safe working and learning environment	272	148
Leadership and management	136	52
Teaching and learning	395	132
Assessment	120	53
Wellbeing	128	64

Inspectors also referenced areas of additional advice and support for principals in an open-ended 'other' section. The comments in this section were relevant to the broad themes outlined in the table above. For example, principals sought advice regarding administrative issues, such as payment for substitute cover and the recording of absences. These responses were integrated into the Leadership and Management theme. Responses referencing staff anxiety or learner wellbeing were amalgamated with the previously established Wellbeing theme. Principals also requested advice in areas such as planning for blended learning, reimagining Transition Year and progressing school improvement plans. These responses were included within the Teaching and Learning theme above.

6. Conclusions

- At the end of September 2020, most schools had reopened and were continuing to operate safely. The significant work undertaken by principals in this regard has been a critical contributing factor. However, many principals reported that the changes and challenges of previous months meant that they were experiencing significant pressure and high stress levels.

- School communities were working to implement effective mitigation policies and practices. Significant investment has been provided to schools and they were availing of advice and guidance provided by the Department and the education partners.

- Practical challenges were evident as schools implemented public health advice, particularly in schools where the space available to accommodate appropriate physical distancing was limited. While guidance has been provided to schools to support them in determining their PPE requirements, some principals expressed concern that existing supplies of equipment and materials could run low as the school year progresses.

- Promoting the wellbeing of school communities has been a fundamental element of the successful return to school. Schools were accessing the supports provided by the Department and other agencies to assist with the promotion of wellbeing. There is evidence to suggest that there remains a need to support the ongoing wellbeing of principals, school leaders and teachers.

- The shortage in the availability of substitute and other short-term contract teachers was very challenging for principals and school leaders.

- Principals reported that teachers had successfully adapted their teaching approaches in the current context. However, the implementation of the curriculum was identified as an area of concern in both primary and post-primary schools. Some principals, particularly at primary level, expressed uncertainty about the school's ability to provide some aspects of the curriculum, such as Physical Education (PE) and Music. Post-primary principals highlighted the difficulties in implementing some practical aspects of subjects due to the repurposing of practical rooms.

- Many principals were conscious of the impact of the lengthy period of school closures on learners, particularly for learners with additional educational needs. It was evident that schools required ongoing support to access and contextualise the guidance that has been provided by the Department in relation to teaching, learning and assessment.

7. Recommendations

- The Department should keep the PPE requirements of schools under review to ensure that schools have adequate volumes in line with their COVID-19 response plans.

- The current work-related pressure on principals needs to be monitored on an ongoing basis; additional supports and resources may be necessary as the school year continues.

- As the school year progresses, the wellbeing supports provided to schools will need to be reviewed to ensure that they remain current and responsive to the evolving needs of school communities.

- Actions to address the issue of teacher supply should continue to be progressed.

- Greater use should be made of social media to assist principals in navigating the suite of guidance and advice currently available on the COVID-19 section of www.gov.ie. In particular, social media channels should be used to alert principals when guidance has been updated, and to identify the specific aspects of guidance which have been amended.

- An important priority for all schools should be to re-establish, plan for and implement interventions for the particular needs of learners with additional educational needs.

- Schools will need to be supported to reimagine extra-curricular and co-curricular activities in the current circumstances. The Department's *Returning to School Transition Year* guidance document which offers good practical examples of alternative activities and includes direct advice on resources and relevant websites should be useful in this regard. The sharing of case studies from schools that have been successful in continuing to provide a range of extra- and co-curricular activities may also be useful.

- Schools will continue to require support on provision for practical subjects including PE and Music to ensure full curriculum delivery in the current context. This may include ensuring that schools are aware of the supports available such as the Department's *Return to School Guidance for Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools and Centres for Education* and providing additional guidance where necessary.

- While teaching and learning continues in a new context for schools, and teachers are working to ensure that learners experience a responsive, balanced and challenging curriculum, there will be a long-term need to analyse and evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning.