

# Teachers' experiences of being back at school following recent school closure

*INTO survey October 2020*

# Teachers' experiences of being back at school following recent school closure

Survey relates to members'  
experiences in September 2020



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## Introduction

Following the school closure which began on 12 March 2020 as part of a national lockdown response to COVID-19, primary teachers continued to support their pupils' learning remotely until the end of June. This uncertain time was challenging for the entire country and presented specific and unprecedented challenges for the teaching profession. The INTO's Central Executive Committee (CEC) decided that a survey should be conducted once schools reopened in September, to gauge how teachers had felt going back to school and how they now felt, having been back in their classroom for one month. This survey was circulated on Friday, 2 October 2020, so this summary of feedback received reflects teachers' experiences of school in September 2020.

## Dataset

For the electronic survey, 4,000 members were randomly selected from our database; of these, 3881 had valid email addresses and had opted to receive emails. In total, 720 responses were received, which is a response rate of 18.5%.

The teaching profile of the respondents was spread between 53% mainstream class teachers, 29% special education teachers (SETs), 7% administrative principals, 3% teaching principals, and 8% other.

The school profile of respondents included 5% who were teaching in a special school and 23% who were teaching in a DEIS school (12% urban 1, 6% urban 2 and 5% rural). Over half of the respondents (56%) stated that they were in a school that was part of a supply panel cluster, with 17% not involved in a cluster and a significant proportion not aware of whether their school was involved or not.

## Before Returning to School

### How did you feel about returning to school?

A total of 25% of respondents were 'happy to be going back', 29% were 'slightly apprehensive' and 19% were 'apprehensive'. A further 24% were either 'anxious' or 'very anxious', and 2% stated that they did not return to school.

Teachers were given a list of possible areas of concern, and asked to identify those issues that concerned them most. The top concerns prior to the return to school were:

1. Safety of family members
2. The lack of space for physical distancing
3. The teacher's own safety
4. The health and well-being of their pupils (following lockdown)

### How prepared was your school for a full return of pupils?

Following enormous efforts made by school leaders to prepare schools for re-opening, it was not surprising to learn that 80% of respondents felt that their school was either 'very prepared' or 'prepared' for the new academic year in September. A further 18% noted that 'reasonable attempts' had been made, with just 2% noting that they judged their school to be unprepared.

Practically all schools (94%) had prepared a COVID-19 response plan policy document and appointed a lead worker representative (98%). Similar numbers were reflected for those schools that had agreed procedures in place for dealing with a suspected case of COVID-19 on the premises (96%).

Many changes had taken place in respondents' schools, for example, over 80% of schools had updated their visitor policy to reflect the new procedures needed in schools, with 94% of schools now advising visitors to wear a face covering. In relation to masks, it was also noted that over 60% of schools advised parents to wear a mask at pick-up and drop-off points.

## Procedures in Schools

There was solid adoption of procedures in the event of a pupil becoming unwell including 98% of respondents' schools having a designated isolation area, 80% having an agreed protocol as to who would remain with the pupil while in isolation, 93% satisfied that they had up-to-date contact details for all parents/guardians and 80% having a protocol for appropriate cleaning of isolation area and work area.

Around the school, 98% of respondents stated that they had posters on display throughout the school building to promote good hand hygiene and 99% had hand sanitiser at entry points and exit points of the school with a further 95% also having hand sanitiser at entry and exit points to each classroom.

Over 85% of respondents' schools had implemented an enhanced cleaning regime, and 72% of respondents noted that areas that were used by different groups of pupils, such as a dining room or learning support room, were cleaned before the next group of pupils used the room (22% didn't know the answer).

In relation to social/physical distancing in the school yard, it was noted that in almost all cases (97%), separate spaces for classes had been allocated or marked out. In 83% of respondents' schools, this involved using markings on the ground. In addition, 88% of respondents' schools now implemented staggered break times.

Once the protocols and procedures had been developed, agreed and adopted, teachers were asked whether the guidelines regarding social/physical distancing were being implemented in their schools. In 40% of cases the response was 'yes, all the time', in 52% of cases the answer was 'yes, some of the time'. Only 8% of respondents were of the opinion that the guidelines were not being implemented in their school.

### PPE

Teachers were asked to outline the PPE that was provided for them by their school. Over 85% of respondents stated that they were provided with face visors; 72% with face masks; 68% had access to disposable gloves and 40% to disposable aprons. In order to deal with the disposal of PPE, 75% stated that they had access to waste disposal bins. It must be noted that in a small number of respondents' schools, teachers were asked to provide their own masks.

## Teacher well-being

This survey was circulated at the start of October, and given that teachers were back in their schools for a month, the question was asked 'How do you feel now you have been back in school for a while?'. Understandably, just 3% of respondents replied that they felt 'safe and secure'; 38% felt 'safe but alert', while 34% admitted they still felt a 'bit apprehensive'. In all, 14% of respondents felt 'anxious' and a further 11% felt 'very anxious'.

Teachers were asked about their well-being and, in particular, if they felt supports were in place to promote their well-being. The answers were split 60/40, with 40% feeling that supports were in place, but 60% disagreeing. Following up on the question of online supports and training, it emerged that 42% of respondents had watched the NEPS webinar on well-being, and 58% had not.

A series of statements was made to gauge the reaction of teachers to how prepared they had felt returning to school. Responding to the statement 'I feel that my personal safety has been considered and that I will be cared for', there was an even split between 40% who agreed and 40% who disagreed (20% didn't offer an opinion).

Altogether, 54% of respondents felt confident about managing pupil movement around the classroom and 89% felt confident about promoting good hygiene practices with children. 55% were confident that pupils are adhering to good hygiene practice in handling of classroom materials and resources, however nearly 70% of teachers were concerned that the implementation of infection controls/hygiene measures was taking away from teaching time.

## Pupil learning and well-being

A majority (77%) of respondents stated that they were confident about supporting pupils' well-being, however, it must be noted that a significant percentage of teachers (61%) were of the opinion that pupils in their classroom had regressed during the period of extended school closure.

To deal with this, 54% of respondents felt confident that a whole-school approach had been put in place to identify curriculum priorities in light of the school closures, and 56% felt confident that a whole-school approach had been taken to prioritise well-being in line with DE guidelines.

In relation to homework policy, 84% of respondents' schools had decided to adapt their homework policy in the short-term.

## Special education

An overwhelming majority of teachers (80%) agreed that SEN children's learning had been impacted more than others during school closure. Since September, 47% of teachers stated that the organisation of SET provision had changed in their school, while 37% noted that the organisation of SET provision for pupils had not changed significantly. Looking further into these results, it emerged that over 40% of respondents' schools now withdraw pupils with SEN for individual or small group support to a lesser extent than before. In addition, where a SET had previously provided in-class support or station teaching, this practice is now continued to a lesser extent in almost 50% of cases, although 23% have continued with the same level of in-class support.

In a question that was aimed at those schools that have special classes, it was found that 32% continue to integrate the pupils in those classes into mainstream classes regularly, however a further 32% have reduced this practice.

Of those teachers who were working closely with pupils with SEN, 51% were satisfied with the PPE provided, while 32% were not and 17% didn't express an opinion.

## Communicating with parents

Since the re-opening of schools, methods of communicating with parents has had to change in many instances. When asked to list all means of communication, it was clear that 71% of respondents' schools now communicate through email, 61% rely on the school website, 54% use text to contact parents and 16% use a school journal.

## Digital technology

The nature of remote learning and the huge increase in the reliance on digital technologies that became a necessarily vital part of the school closures is the subject of a separate questionnaire, the results of which were discussed at the INTO's online panel discussion – [Digital Learning in the Primary School](#). However, in relation to the use of digital technology, it emerged that 63% of respondents claimed that they had always used digital technology in their work. Just over a quarter (26%) had introduced digital technology during the school closure, with a small percentage (6%) stating that they had introduced digital technology since schools had reopened. A very small minority (3%) did not use digital technology in their work.

## Continuity of learning

Over two thirds of teachers felt that they were quite confident that they could provide for the continuity of learning should their school either fully or partially close in the future.

## Workload

In a very clear finding, on the subject of workload, almost 90% of respondents stated that their workload had increased since they returned to school. In addition, it was noted that supervision had also increased in 90% of cases.

## EPV days

Just over 50% of respondents noted that their school had changed their policy on taking extra personal vacation days for this school year, and the remainder were evenly split between those that noted no change or weren't aware of whether there had been change or not.

## Substitute teachers

It emerged that in nearly 50% of cases, respondents' schools had difficulty finding a substitute teacher, while 25% did not have any difficulty and 27% did not know.

## **Pupils in very high risk category**

The response to this question was divided evenly, with one third of respondents stating that their school had pupils in the very high risk category, one third stating that they did not have pupils in this category and one third who didn't know. In relation to the support given to these pupils, in the majority of cases (73%) this is provided by the class teacher; 29% of very high risk pupils receive support from the school's existing support teaching resources or team and a further 10% receive support from a designated teacher in their school, who is at very high risk. Less than 1% receive support from a designated teacher from another school who is at very high risk.

## **Staff meetings**

Since the reopening of schools, staff meetings are now held virtually in 44% of cases; 39% have been held in the staff room or other room in the school, and 15% had not yet had a staff meeting.

## **Open Ended Questions**

### **What are your concerns now that you have returned to school?**

This was an open-ended question which left room for respondents to outline what their concerns were based on their experience of being back to school in September. The biggest concern was reflected in the response "my health, my children's health, my colleagues' health and the health of my pupils". There was widespread fear of contracting COVID-19 and passing it on to a family member, and this fear was exacerbated when the family member was vulnerable or in a very high risk category. A number of respondents outlined how they had decided not to visit elderly parents or immunocompromised siblings as they were afraid of passing on the virus. One respondent said that she was "terrified of carrying the virus home" to her high risk husband and son. This level of fear and anxiety no doubt contributed to another concern identified, that of teacher exhaustion and mental well-being. One teacher noted that they struggled with "trying to balance the amount of work dictated by the curriculum with the well-being of the children and the need to continually sanitise equipment and ensure children are adhering to hand-washing rules, social distancing etc., and keeping the children, myself and my family safe". Another summed up many of the concerns by noting that "burnout, extra workload and always being in a state of alert for my own safety and that of students and colleagues ... increased supervision duties and technology overload" were factors contributing to stress.

Other concerns centred on the lack of space in the classroom, with one teacher, who was pregnant, describing how she had 34 6th class pupils and an SNA in a small, old classroom. Low staff morale was also noted by many as a concern, as the lack of communication due to staggered breaks, small staffrooms and fear of contracting the virus had led to feelings of isolation. Teachers spoke of eating their lunch in their classroom and missing the informal contact and support of their colleagues.

Curriculum issues were also raised by some, as the new hand-washing routines eroded class time. Pupils with SEN were identified as most vulnerable to changes such as mask-wearing, less movement around the school and fewer physical resources available, as well as in some cases, less access to sensory rooms.

Other concerns centred around the spread of COVID-19 within the community and the lack of adherence to recommendations on social gatherings such as children's parties, sleep-overs etc. Some respondents also did not feel confident about the way the number of cases in schools was reported in the media and called for clarification on this issue.

### **What would support schools to remain open?**

The overwhelming response to this question was – smaller class sizes. Generally, respondents called for more space, smaller classes, more substitute teachers and a significantly improved testing and tracing system. Given that 90% of respondents noted their workload had increased and a similar number noted that supervision duties had increased, there was a call for additional staffing to be allocated to all schools to alleviate this problem – one teacher calling for "more teachers, more teachers, more teachers – extra bodies to help with keeping children safe, supervision and could work with smaller groups and would reduce stress on everyone and therefore hopefully prevent teachers getting sick".

More efficient support from the Public Health Service was also called for, in addition to a clearer policy on close contacts within a school and quicker turnaround times for testing.

### **What other way could the INTO support you in relation to being back to school and keeping the schools open?**

There were many suggestions for what the INTO could do to support members in relation to being back to school, not all of them feasible. However, the main demands centred on pushing hard for teacher's concerns to be reflected in all government and HSE decisions and advocating for and defending the profession in the media. One respondent noted, "I fully support the reopening of schools and I hope we can continue to stay open. I would like communications from the INTO to give me the sense that both mine and the children's safety is their top priority".

Another stated, "Lobby the government for increased funding for general resources (as everything has to be shared between pods), continued funding for hygiene materials, increase in testing procedures, recognition of the work being done by teachers and colleagues (now we are frontline workers) and ensure that we are not hit with wage cuts when this is over".

A significant number of respondents pointed to the need to address the testing and tracing system in schools and called on the INTO to prioritise this with the Department of Education (DE) and the Health Service Executive (HSE). Many teachers were critical of what they perceived as the INTO not being strong enough in defending the health and safety of teachers.

There was an acknowledgement of the work that the INTO had done in lobbying for class size reduction, and this needs to continue, "keep fighting for class size reduction and reasonable requests like pay restoration and a free flu vaccine". Also, "fight for more than one (substitutionable) EPV day ... for our well-being".

Another respondent called on the INTO to "keep the government accountable for supporting schools – with extra provision of supervision in the mornings before school ... and put a freeze on the policy where the number of pupils determine whether a school loses teachers or not".

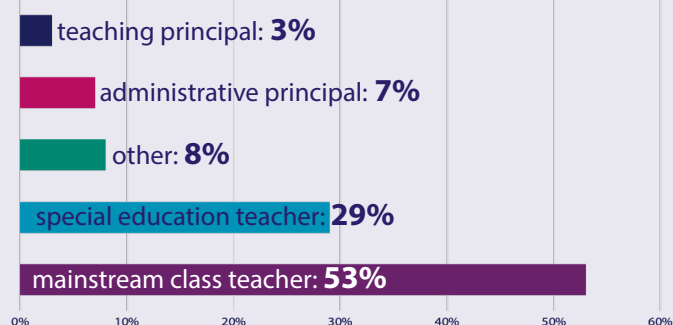
# INTO Members Return to School Survey Results

October 2020

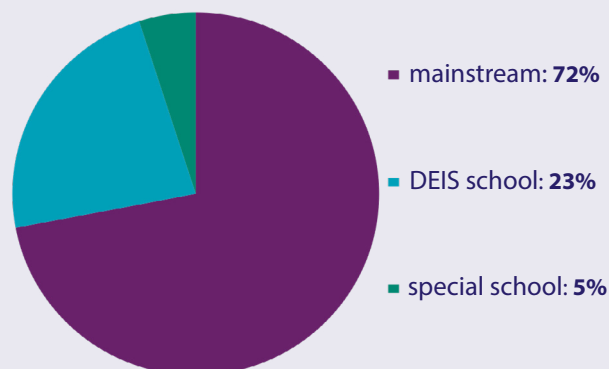
Respondents: 720



## Teaching profile of respondents



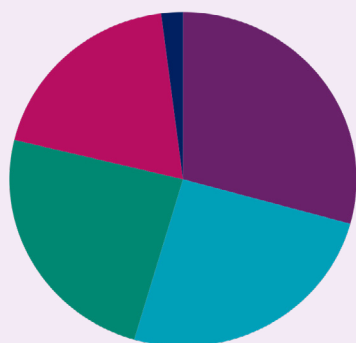
## School profile of respondents



# 90%

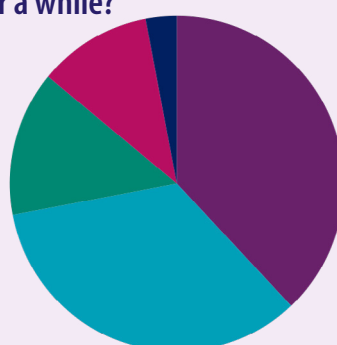
 noted an increase in workload

### How did you feel about returning to school?



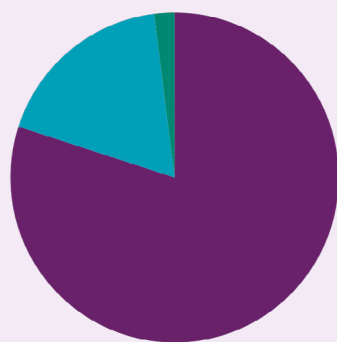
■ slightly apprehensive: 29%   ■ happy to be going back: 25%  
■ anxious: 24%   ■ apprehensive: 19%  
■ did not return: 2%

### How do you feel now you have been back in school for a while?



■ safe but alert: 38%   ■ bit apprehensive: 34%  
■ anxious: 14%   ■ very anxious: 11%  
■ safe and secure: 3%

### How prepared was your school for a full return?



■ very prepared: 80%   ■ reasonable attempt made: 18%  
■ unprepared: 2%

**94%** schools had a COVID-19 response plan policy document

**98%** schools appointed a lead worker representative

**96%** schools had procedures for dealing with a suspected case of COVID-19

# 80%

 of teachers agreed that SEN children's learning had been impacted more than others during school closure

# 70% were concerned implementation of infection control measures was taking away from teaching time



## PPE provided



aprons: 40%



gloves: 68%



face masks: 75%

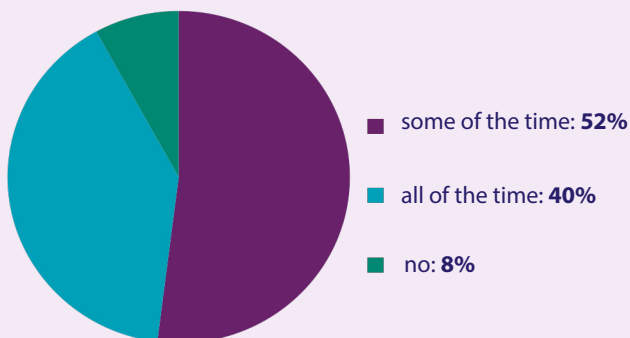


face visors: 85%

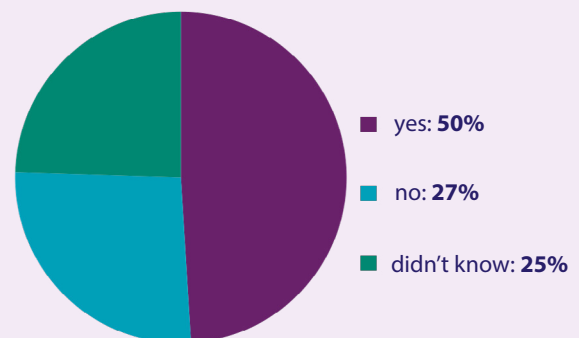
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90%

# In relation to distancing in the school yard, separate spaces for classes was allocated or marked out 97%

Are the guidelines regarding social distancing being implemented?



Did your school have difficulty sourcing substitute teachers?



**63%** had always used digital technology in their work

**6%** introduced digital technology since schools had reopened

**26%** introduced digital technology during the school closure

**3%** did not use digital technology in their work



## The top concerns prior to returning to school

1. Safety of family members
2. The lack of space for physical distancing
3. Teacher's own safety
4. The health and well-being of their pupils (following lock-down)