

# Ensuring that schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable

Submission to Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science on behalf of the INTO

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## 1. Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) is the largest teachers' organisation in Ireland representing the trade union and professional interests of almost 50,000 members in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The INTO welcomes the invitation by the **Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science** to outline the issues and challenges that face Irish primary schools and special schools as they work towards ensuring that they can remain open in a manner that is both safe and sustainable. This submission relates to primary schools and special schools in the Republic of Ireland.

As the impact of COVID-19 extends across the country, teachers in the Irish primary school sector, including special education settings, continue to provide education, routine and stability for their classes in the face of enormous challenges. Over the last number of weeks, as significant changes to the public health landscape have taken place, it is now apparent that a comprehensive review of the operation of schools since they re-opened in late August/early September must be undertaken immediately. It is also vital that there is a renewed public commitment by the government to put in place the robust preventative measures and clear protocols needed to protect the entire school community.

## 2. Health concerns

INTO is increasingly concerned that public health precautions and responses for teachers are inadequate. Recent comments by Dr Henry of NPHET, who said it appears widespread community transmission is a threat to schools, give rise to alarm. This was followed by the admission by Dr Kevin Kelleher, also of NPHET, at a meeting of the Primary Education Forum on 20 October, that the public health system had been overwhelmed in the previous two weeks.

Many primary teachers have underlying health conditions or have family members whose health is at risk from COVID-19. The threat associated with the current very high levels of infection in communities is leading to apprehension and anxiety among school staff nationwide, especially as the country moves to Level 5 of the *Plan for Living with COVID-19*.

INTO welcomes the development that representatives of NPHET, education unions, school management and the Department of Education will meet weekly throughout Level 5. INTO insists that it be represented on any government steering group involved in pandemic planning in primary and special schools and that the work of the steering group is communicated to all stakeholders.

Considering the deteriorating landscape, the INTO demands the immediate publication of the exact number of school staff who have tested positive since September categorised by school type – primary/special school and by staff roles – mainstream class teacher, special education teacher, other non-class teachers, SNA, school secretary, caretaker etc. and publication of the medical

evidence supporting the continuation of attendance in schools of staff who are pregnant or are in the high-risk category of health. Similar data for students must also be published weekly.

As the country moves to Level 5, an evidence-based public health decision on the status of primary and special schools must be communicated to education stakeholders, including the INTO, after consultation and engagement, by the end of October. INTO demands an additional suite of protective measures for primary and special schools, including the immediate banning of extra-curricular activities, the restriction of parents/guardians congregating at school grounds to a maximum of 15 mask-wearing adults at any given time, a strict no visitors policy for all schools and the provision of funding to ensure that teachers and pupils can engage with remote learning.

School staff and students, who have done their utmost to adjust to the new realities of school life since the Summer, deserve as much protection as everyone else in society.

## 3. Preventing the introduction and transmission of COVID-19 in schools

INTO is concerned that adults congregating near school buildings pose a risk to everyone in school communities. The congregation of parents, carers or other adults at schools, particularly at drop-off and collection times, must be actively discouraged because that is where the major potential for spreading the disease lies<sup>1</sup>. Clear communication from the government is necessary to underline the responsibility of all citizens to adhere to this practice. This must involve a public information campaign to coincide with schools' reopening after mid-term.

Visits to schools must also be restricted, and arrangements put in place for controlled access for essential visitors. A list of essential visitors, to include specialist teachers, therapists and NEPS psychologists, and procedures for dealing with them, should be supplied to schools, together with guidance provided about other visitors such as inspectors, PDST personnel and student teachers.

An urgent review of the policy on the wearing of face coverings by pupils and school staff is now essential to provide up to date public health guidance on the use of this equipment in primary and special school settings.

In addition, as the country moves to Level 5 of the *Plan for Living with COVID-19*, the safety measures around school transport arrangements for children attending primary and special schools must be re-visited.

## 4. Pupil learning and welfare

Teachers must use their professional discretion to adapt the curriculum to meet the educational needs of their pupils and the changed context of the school day. The decision not to administer

1. Dr Nabarro (WHO), Dáil Committee on Covid Response, 11 June 2020



standardised tests with pupils until after Easter 2021 is welcomed. Teachers should be trusted to exercise their professional judgement and knowledge of pupils to choose the best way to gather the information on pupils' progress that they need.

There is still a need for guidance on the teaching of PE – as we enter the winter season and the scope for outdoor activities becomes limited – and advice on the teaching of music and singing is also needed.

While huge efforts have been made to support pupils' education, a recent INTO member survey revealed that 80% of respondents warned that the learning of children with special educational needs was impacted most during the school closures.

It is imperative that additional resources and supports be invested in schools by NEPS, NCSE, CAMHS and TUSLA to help mitigate this situation.

Distance learning is currently a feature of practice for a small minority of children. Arrangements must be put in place to properly resource and support this practice should it be necessary to expand it. INTO strongly emphasises that teachers cannot be expected to support pupils' learning remotely after or alongside teaching the pupils who are attending school.

INTO notes the commitments below in the Programme for Government:

'The Government ... will prepare detailed contingency plans for further potential school closures while also investing in teacher CPD to support distance and blended learning'<sup>2</sup>

Measures, resources, support and training for teachers (ICT etc.) must be developed and put in place immediately to facilitate remote working if it becomes necessary. However, at all times it must be acknowledged that distance education is far from ideal for some pupils, particularly those in the infant and junior classes and children with SEN for whom meaningful engagement with remote learning is not possible.

In Ireland, there is an enormous disparity in levels of technology and broadband available to both teachers and their pupils. INTO welcomes the recent Budget announcement of the extra funds to allow for the early payment of the ICT grant, and calls for this to be paid immediately to schools. No student or teacher should be disadvantaged during and after the time of the COVID-19 crisis because of not having access to appropriate digital and communication devices and tools or because of facing specific individual and/or social barriers. Inequalities in access to quality education due to the socio-economic and geographical background of students must not be further exacerbated and the digital divide must be addressed.

## 5. Special schools and classes

Teachers and other members of staff working in special schools and classes continue to have very specific health concerns, both for themselves and their pupils, as they work in situations where pupils may be unable to adhere to physical distancing measures or may have intimate care needs.

A review must be undertaken immediately of the demand for and draw-down of funds for medical-grade PPE for staff engaged in intimate care needs. No school must be left short in this regard, and funding must be put in place for the post-Christmas period.

## 6. Issues for teachers

As the public health advice continues to evolve to react to the deteriorating landscape, it is imperative that teachers feel reassured that they have a safe workplace, and are not subject to lower levels of protection and guidance than workers in any other sector.

There is still a need for clarification on certain matters of conditions of employment including:

- 'Long Covid' leave
- Payment for casual substitute teachers who have had to take Covid leave
- Provisions and conditions for self-isolation e.g. teachers who are parents where their child/ren must self-isolate
- Arrangements for teachers in at-risk categories/reasonable accommodation
- Support for schools with a significant cohort of teachers in this category
- Further clarification from the public health authorities of the level of risk – or of additional risk, if any – to pregnant teachers
- Living with/caring for people whose health is at risk

## 7. Leadership issues

The burden placed on school leaders during the shutdown, the summer holidays and the school year so far have been immense. The additional administrative burden and the anxiety of staff, pupils and parents have made a difficult job even more challenging.

INTO welcomed the expansion of the pilot Teacher Supply Panel scheme as a response to the need for schools to access substitute teachers in a timely and efficient manner. There are, however, still gaps within the system and currently, approximately 1,000 primary schools are not covered by this scheme. Supports to schools must ensure that staffing is maintained so that no class needs to be divided or dismissed in circumstances of teacher absence. As the year progresses with the inevitable seasonal illnesses, the inadequate nature of the supply of qualified substitute teachers to schools will become acute and may result in school closures.

2. <https://static.rasset.ie/documents/news/2020/06/draft-programme-for-govt.pdf> p.113



Principal teachers have also had to grapple with the frustration of not having access to rapid testing and results in the context of a suspected case of COVID-19 in a school. To date, the government has failed to deliver a fit for purpose, fast-tracked, sector-specific testing and tracing system in the eight weeks since schools reopened. This has resulted in principal teachers regularly having to initiate out of hours contact with families and staff members when they have been notified of positive tests. This situation is simply untenable.

In addition, a clear explanation of the difference between a close contact and casual contact in a school setting must be set out. When HSE risk assessments are conducted following confirmation of a positive case in a school, there must be direct consultation with all staff associated with the class in which the confirmed case is based. It is essential that the class and staff in question are tested within 24 hours and that they restrict movement until the testing and tracing process is complete.

## 8. Communication

It is vital that clear national protocols and guidance are drawn up and made available for all members of the school community. Staff and parents need to know what to expect under each level of the National Framework for Restrictive Measures. The government must launch a public awareness campaign during the October mid-term break, designed to ensure that everyone in society receives clear messaging regarding their responsibilities to protect school staffs and students, if they want schools to remain open safely. All decisions concerning schools remaining open must be taken in the context of public health advice and priority must be given to the safety and physical/mental health and wellbeing of staff, pupils and parents in primary schools.

If maintaining the operation of schools is, as stated, a significant priority in public policy, the necessary dedicated supports and resources must reflect this priority. While schools adhere to best practice in terms of maintaining a strict no-visitor policy, teachers have always been cognisant of the need for effective communication and collaboration with parents. Parent-teacher meetings and meetings with parents of children with special educational needs should be confined to situations where these are clearly necessary and must be conducted remotely. Parents and pupils should be made aware that it is unreasonable to expect replies both immediately or outside of normal working hours and to be mindful of the time it takes teachers to reply to all parents/carers and pupils.

## 9. Conclusion

Ensuring that schools remain open in a safe and sustainable manner remains a goal shared by all members of the school community. However, for this goal to remain realistic, practical actions are needed. Clear protocols for what will happen in schools at levels 4 and 5 of the *Plan for Living with COVID-19* must be put in place so that schools can prepare for and react appropriately to any changes in public health advice. The government's *Plan for Living with COVID-19* notes that recommendations regarding the status of schools at Level 5 will be based 'on the situation and evidence at the time.' The mid-October evidence, based on which government made its decision to open at Level 5, must be kept under weekly review and, where necessary, schools must either close or partially close. INTO has engaged constructively with government on the development of the roadmap for the safe reopening of schools, which was underpinned by expert Irish public health advice three months ago. The level of infection in Ireland at that time was significantly lower than at present. As has been our consistent position, all decisions related to schools must be led by public health advice.

If our primary and special schools are to fully reopen after mid-term break and operate safely next month, government must ensure that the necessary protective measures and protocols are put in place within the next fortnight. If these concerns are not addressed, there is a real danger that members of the school community will make individual decisions not to return to school on 2 November, due to the perceived health risks and concerns about inadequate recognition of such risks in policy responses.

The desire of teachers to keep schools open must be met and matched with a firm commitment to keep schools safe.