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9<sup>th</sup> October 2020

Dear John,

Thank you for your letter of 5<sup>th</sup> October.

Schools have been open for more than a month now, and the Department is aware that some concerns have been expressed by members of the schools community in relation to the continued safe operation of schools during the pandemic. This anxiety may have become more acute as Ireland has moved into Level 3 of the Plan for Living with COVID-19.

Keeping schools and childcare facilities (CCFS) safely open for children and staff is a key priority at all levels of the [Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19](#). At levels 1-4 inclusive, schools can remain open with protective measures, and at level 5, recommendations will be based on the situation and evidence at the time. While I understand your concerns in relation to whether the current approaches recommended by the HPSC in July and updated in August remain fit for purpose as the disease progresses, let me assure you that the Department has been assured by the public health authorities that the current measures are proving to be highly effective at minimising transmission within the school setting. Indeed, they were designed to ensure a safe environment within the school setting regardless of what is happening in terms of transmission in the wider community. These measures and the relevant evidence both nationally and internationally are being kept under continued review by public health specialists.

As you are aware the plan prioritises very strongly the sustainable and safe operation of schools throughout the pandemic. In that respect, the Department is engaging closely with colleagues in the Department of Health and with public health doctors on a weekly basis, to obtain their perspective in relation to the safety of schools vis-a-vis the current trajectory of the COVID-19 disease.

In recent days, this issue has been afforded careful consideration by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). In recommending that schools remain open, the NPHE has considered the national experience of school reopening to date, including the epidemiological data and information gathered through case and outbreak management.

This perspective is very reassuring and I would like to share the key points with you. In summary, the Department of Health's Office of the Chief Medical Officer has acknowledged that much work has been undertaken to facilitate the safe reopening of schools in Ireland,



including the production of sectoral guidance available via the [‘Back to School’](#) webpage on gov.ie and that the exceptional efforts of school staff, children and parents/guardians in implementing this guidance has contributed to the safe and successful reopening of schools in Ireland. Confirmation has also been provided of the following.

The decision to recommend that schools remain open in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the current trajectory of the disease in Ireland is based on multiple factors including the following:

- The Irish experience to date supports the current international position that schools are low risk environments for COVID-19 and are not key drivers of transmission in the community.
- Many cases of COVID-19 linked to schools in Ireland have been found to have exposure to the disease outside of the school environment, e.g. in a household or social setting.
- Similarly, where testing of close contacts (of confirmed cases linked to the school), identifies additional cases of COVID-19, many of these are found to have had exposure to the disease outside of the school.
- There have been relatively few instances where transmission of COVID-19 within a school is strongly suspected by HSE Public Health.
- The importance of schools for the overall health and wellbeing of children cannot be overstated and the risk of COVID-19 must be carefully weighed against the very real harm that can be caused by sustained school closures.
- When children do develop COVID-19, the great majority experience no symptoms or very mild symptoms.
- International evidence, and the Irish experience to date, suggests that adults (e.g. teachers/staff) are not at higher risk of COVID-19 in the school setting than in the wider community or household.

In supporting these conclusions, the Department of Health has provided the Department with some up to date factual information. As already noted, the Irish experience to date is reassuring and supports the current international position that schools and childcare facilities do not appear to be key drivers of COVID-19 transmission in the community.

As of 6<sup>th</sup> October, a total 252 schools have had/are having some testing completed as a consequence of a Public Health Risk Assessment. From the 252 schools that had mass tests, with 5,890 students and staff having been tested, an additional 112 detected cases have been



identified over and above original cases (a positive detection rate for COVID-19 of less than 2%).

The Department of Health also note that that these additional cases did not necessarily develop COVID-19 as a result of contact with an index case in the school, and the additional cases detected via contact tracing are likely to include people who contracted COVID-19 as result of exposure in the wider community (e.g. household/social setting).

In other words, where children or staff members are contracting COVID-19 in the community (mostly in household and social settings), mass testing is only showing an additional 112 cases in total up until 6<sup>th</sup> October being detected in schools and many of these additional cases are likely not being transmitted in the school but are being picked up also from exposure in the wider community.

Finally, there was no significant change in the proportion of total weekly COVID-19 cases attributable to school-aged children (4-18 years) before (August, weeks 32-35 inclusive) and after (September, weeks 36-40 inclusive) reopening of schools (**14.3%** and **14.1%** respectively), supporting the hypothesis that children are not at increased risk from COVID-19 in the school setting.

I hope that this provides your members as well as all staff, students and parents with clear information and reassurance. It is the view of public health teams that for the most part, schools are very successfully implementing the HPSC recommendations that have been provided for schools and that the measures recommended and funded through very significant additional funding from the Department are proving very effective in keeping transmission levels in the school setting so low. Recommendations are being kept under review by public health specialists as we continue to deal with the ongoing pandemic.

Schools are proving to be safe spaces for children in Ireland and for the staff who are making every effort to implement public health advice. In doing so you are ensuring that schools continue to provide high quality educational experiences as safely as possible and the Department would like to acknowledge once more the contribution of all concerned to this national effort and the very helpful and constructive engagement of INTO during this difficult period for the sector.

The Department will continue to work closely with all of the education partners and the public health system so that schools can continue to be supported as much as possible in this very challenging time.

Yours sincerely

Deirdre

**Deirdre Shanley**

*Rúnaí Cúnta/ Assistant Secretary*