



John Boyle
General Secretary
INTO
Vere Foster House
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27th October 2020

Dear John,

Thank you for your letter of 21st October and your welcome of the input of public health doctors, Dr Kevin Kelleher and Dr Abigail Collins at the Primary Education Forum.

As you are aware, Dr Kelleher and Dr Collins, despite the very considerable demands on their time resulting from the pandemic, have agreed to a weekly engagement with the education partners, including INTO and the main management bodies. This forum will allow issues and concerns to be raised and answered and will also provide Public Health with an opportunity to update on how schools are being supported in sustaining their operations during the course of the pandemic.

In relation to the evidence that you have sought, the HSE is now providing regular updates on key indicators that are being used to inform NPHE's considerations and advice to Government on measures necessary to control the transmission of Covid-19 in the community. These include data on schools, the levels of mass testing and the positivity detection rates in each type of school. I have passed on INTO's request for the very detailed data you have set out in your letter to the HSE and await their response.

As you are aware, the letter from NPHE to Government on 15th October with the most recent recommendations advised that in the current situation under Level 5, schools are safe to remain open with the appropriate protective measures in place. Those protective measures were set out by the HPSC and published by the Department at the beginning of July. They are under continuous review and were updated, as you are aware, in relation to the wearing of face coverings, and in relation to school transport provision for post primary schools. In recent weeks, supplementary advice for staff working with SEN children has been published by the HPSC and circulated to all schools. All of this advice, when

implemented properly, is designed to provide a safe working environment for staff and students including those in the normal and higher risk categories.

The HSE acknowledges the incredible effort made in all school communities throughout the country to operate in a Covid-19 safe manner. The measures that are in place are robust, and the safety of staff and children is the paramount concern of this Department and the HSE.

Evidence provided by the HSE shows that those efforts and the current measures have proved very successful. Clearly the increase of Covid-19 cases in the community does pose a challenge as there will be more cases in schools as a result, but it is important to note that schools are not amplification settings for cases of Covid-19. Current testing data from schools is reassuring, with a positivity rate of 2.8% of close contacts across all school sectors and childcare facilities. Of the 443 additional cases in 155 schools detected from mass testing to date, only 72 positive cases are in adults over the age of 18 years.

In terms of the definitions of close contacts that you request in your letter and the identification of criteria to close classes, year groups or schools, I would again draw your attention to the Schools Pathway document which sets out the public health approach to risk assessment in schools following a confirmed case. The PHRA takes into account a number of variables and this is used to provide a determination of who is deemed a close or casual contact. The current contact tracing guidelines on the HPSC website define a close contact and these have been developed with reference to ECDC and WHO recommendations.

Schools have been recognised as a priority group in our society. To support this group HSE teams have worked to ensure the schools testing pathway is efficient and optimised. This includes the testing of the schools as groups, and thereafter prioritising these tests at labs in identified batches.

The rise in cases overall in the community and in the positivity rate has challenged the HSE and public health departments considerably over the last weeks, and this has had an impact on response times in schools. As you know, Public Health acknowledged at the meeting that additional resources are being put in place to ensure a swifter reaction, and are aiming to have processes strengthened by the time schools return after the midterm break. Teams of support people are being put in place across the departments of public health and these will be supported by the Department of Education.

In terms of standardised advice on dealing with Covid-related absence, the Department is revising the current circular dealing with this issue in line with updated FAQs published by DPER and a revised draft will issue for consultation shortly.

In relation to communication, the Department will be working with our own communications team and with the HSE to spread greater awareness of the safety of schools and the very

considerable efforts being made by your members and other staff to keep our school communities safe. I know that you have offered your assistance in that regard during the course of your regular engagement with the Department in relation to these matters and acknowledge the important role that your organisation is playing in keeping teachers informed in this respect.

I would like to reaffirm the Department's and the Government's commitment to maintaining a safe environment in our schools. As you know, a significant amount of funding has been put in place to support schools in implementing their Covid response plans. As HSE data shows, this is proving very effective in terms of suppressing transmission in schools among both staff and students relative to community transmission. I hope that the strong engagement being facilitated by the Department and Public Health with the education partners will provide greater assurance for you and your members as the school year progresses. I look forward to working with you in this regard.

Yours sincerely

Aoife Conduit
Assistant Secretary General