



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Head Office
Vere Foster House
35 Parnell Square
Dublin 1
D01 ET35

Phone: 01 804 7700
Email: info@into.ie
Web: www.into.ie

Minister Norma Foley, TD,
Minister for Education, Department for Education,
Marlborough Street, Dublin 1.
D01 RC96

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minister@education.gov.ie

A Aire, a chara,

I hope that you managed to spend some down-time with your family over Christmas.

I write in advance of tomorrow's cabinet meeting regarding additional public health measures to request that government give consideration to delaying the start of the next school term until Monday January 11 2021 at the earliest.

I believe that the education partners would support changed arrangements for the standardised school year on public health grounds in the interest of securing safer schools for pupils, staff and their families. The INTO remains strongly committed to supporting our 42,000 members in safe workplaces, as they endeavour to teach and support the wellbeing of their pupils at school where children undoubtedly benefit greatly. However, it is now becoming very clear that the ability of schools to operate normally is likely to be seriously impaired due to the higher numbers of staff and students who will need to self-isolate /restrict movement in the weeks following Christmas.

The following issues must be borne in mind by government when making an informed judgement regarding the most appropriate date for reopening schools next month.

1. The number of positive cases identified as a result of mass-testing in schools increased steadily this month, judging by HSE Reports on Mass Testing for Schools and Childcare Facilities (Weeks 49-51). While we await the report on week 52, we are aware that public health risk assessments in schools have continued beyond Christmas day and that the number of staff members testing positive in primary and special schools has increased in recent weeks.
2. The number of confirmed cases has grown at an alarming rate in the last fortnight with nearly 700 children of primary school age testing positive in the fourteen days prior to schools closing for the Christmas holidays.
3. A new strain of Covid-19, which reportedly is 70% more transmissible and may present an increased risk among children, has now been identified in Ireland.
4. The recent tripling of the number of referrals for Covid-19 testing in Ireland with GPs reporting a 65% increase in referrals in the last week.
5. A larger number of people hospitalised due to Covid-19 than at any time since mid-May
6. The acute shortage of substitute teachers in certain parts of the country as confirmed by INTO to officials from your department in mid December.

An extension of the school closures until the end of next week would give school boards of management time to put enhanced measures in place prior to the beginning of term including:

- supports for the larger number of pupils who will not be in a position to return to school for a few weeks,
- the sourcing of substitutes to cover for staff members who will be absent for a number of weeks having been deemed to be close contacts of confirmed cases or having tested positive during the Christmas closures
- the supply of additional PPE and sanitising liquids, where school supplies are running low.
- an opportunity for BOMs to revise their Covid-19 Response plans, something that INTO believes will be very necessary when the rate of infection in the community is growing exponentially.

Our measured proposal to delay the commencement of the Spring term by a minimum of three school days is designed to minimise disruption to pupils and their families, while providing schools with much needed time to put enhanced safety measures and supports in place. The extra time would also provide government with the opportunity to launch an intensive public awareness campaign on the theme of the importance of safe schools, which was promised to INTO at recent stakeholder consultation meetings.

In our view your government would also be better placed late next week to take account of emerging scientific evidence regarding the new variants of Covid-19 than you possibly could be within the next seven days.

The INTO remains available to work constructively with you in the best interests of everyone in school communities. We trust that you will give this matter your urgent attention.

Is mise, le meas,

John Boyle

General Secretary

INTO (Irish National Teachers' Organisation)
35 Parnell Square
Dublin 1
D01 ET35