

Minister for Education says she has every confidence schools will reopen fully

Sarah Burns

Minister for Education Norma Foley is to bring plans before Cabinet today detailing the reopening of schools from the end of this month, as teachers' unions voice concerns about returning to the classroom.

Ms Foley is due to update the Cabinet about plans for enhanced public information campaigns, the outcome of antigen testing pilots and the purchase of carbon dioxide monitors to assist in ventilating classrooms.

The Minister said yesterday she has every confidence schools will reopen fully from late August and early September. She said there was ongoing engagement between her department and public health officials on the matter but all schools were set to reopen. Diarmaid de Paor, deputy general secretary of the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI), said there are some concerns about pregnant teachers and those deemed high-risk returning.

"They were not expected to go back to schools, they now are. That's the default position," Mr de Paor told The Irish Times.

"Now we're happy that it seems to be the case that if they get medical advice from their consultant, to say that they can't, the department's medical advice will not be overruling that. We will continue to monitor that and make sure that everything is in place."

Medical advice

Mr de Paor also said there are concerns about the Delta variant, adding that the union is in "constant discussion" with the department and Nphet.

"We've always been guided by the medical advice and we will continue to be guided by that. Obviously if there are changes we will be monitoring it and alleviate concerns of members as much as we can and take action if we need to," he said.

He added that the majority of teachers will be vaccinated or will have been offered a vaccine by the end of the month.

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), which represents teachers at primary level, said vaccination of its members remains a key objective, "and we will hold government to its word that all staff in schools will be vaccinated prior to the reopening of our schools".

"We remain determined to ensure that all our members returning to schools in September are vaccinated," a spokesman for the INTO said.

Face coverings

"Ultimately the need for additional public health measures, revised guidance on the wearing of face coverings or the vaccination of children are public health decisions, which must be led by up to date evidence."

Meanwhile, the Department of Education has said schools have been advised that they should continue to operate with the current infection prevention and control measures in place when they reopen.

"Schools will continue to be supported in terms of the additional resources necessary to provide for these measures," a department spokeswoman said.

The department has procured a number of portable CO2 monitors which will be distributed to schools in August and September, between 2 and 20 at primary level and between 20 and 35 at post-primary level depending on school size.

In relation to Covid-19 vaccines for children, Ms Foley said the "expertise" lay with the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) from which her department would take guidance.

“I have received confirmation that the 16 to 18-year-old cohort should be in a position for online registration in the coming days, and I have been advised that the 15-year-olds cohort are still being considered by NIAC and there has been no definitive timeline given,” Ms Foley told RTE radio’s Claire Byrne show.