



**The General Synod Board of Education (Republic of Ireland)
of the
Church of Ireland**

**Submission to the Department of Education and Skills
regarding the re-opening of primary schools during the (2020)
Covid-19 pandemic.**

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1. Preliminary Remarks

We welcome the invitation by the Department of Education and Skills to input into the considerations of how schools might reopen to classroom based teaching and learning from September 2020. Schools closed for classroom based teaching on Friday 12th March 2020 and moved to provide distance learning from Monday 16th March. Over the space of a weekend, our schools adapted to remote/distance learning, which displayed not only, the reliance and innovation of teachers, but their commitment to their pupils and strong professionalism. It is important therefore to note, that while the actual school building closed, the delivery of teaching and learning continued in the homes of pupils, provided and supported by their teachers and parents / guardians. We wish to record our thanks to all the teachers and support staff in our schools. In making this submission, we look ahead, to consider how classroom based teaching might resume. However, before doing so, it is important to recognise that in the midst of a global pandemic, education continued to be delivered to the pupils in our schools. We also wish to thank those principals and chairpersons from our schools that assisted with the compilation of this submission.

Scientific information regarding young people and Covid -19

In envisaging how schools might resume class based teaching, we must at all times be led by scientific advice and the overriding concern must be the health and safety of the children in our schools and the staff who teach and support them. We know that the transmission of the Covid-19 virus is low among younger children. Data from the most recent NPHET Report shows that of the total number of all Covid-19 cases (23,627) 394 relate to children under 14. This represents just 1.6% of the total number of recorded Covid-19 cases in Ireland, with no deaths recorded from among that cohort.¹ This would indicate that, generally speaking, children are well placed to fight the disease. Nonetheless, as noted by An Taoiseach in his recent briefing, at phase 1 of the 'Roadmap', there is no vaccine to prevent this virus, and neither is there any anti-viral prophylactic available.² The reality is therefore, that if a child or adult contracts Covid-19 while in school, there is no medical means of treating that person. We know also that 83.4% of viral transmission is within the community. This indicates that there is still a risk of exposure to both adults and children, despite the transmission rate (R0) being below the key figure of R1 (estimated currently at between R0.5 and R0.8).³

In that connection, we welcome the decision not to reopen schools before June and regard it as a prudent decision.

A return to class based teaching should therefore be based on scientific advice rather than based on September being the traditional date of the beginning of the school year.

¹ Source: https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/casesinireland/epidemiologyofcovid-19inireland/COVID-19%20Epidemiology%20report%20for%20NPHET%2020200511_v2-Website.pdf

² Source: https://merrionstreet.ie/en/News-Room/News/Speech_of_An_Taoiseach_Leo_Varadkar_T_D_Announcement_of_Phase_1_Friday_15_May_2020.html

³ Source: <https://www.rte.ie/news/coronavirus/2020/0423/1134475-covid-19-latest-expert-projections-explained/>

We agree with the views expressed by Education Partner colleagues that **any return to class based teaching should be led by public health considerations and only on the advice of the HSE and public health officials.**

We note that the education departments in other EU countries and also in the UK, have the benefit of close advice of senior medical officials. Such **medical, health hygiene advice and expertise is essential** for any forward planning regarding the return to class based teaching and learning. School management, both nationally and locally, should have access and recourse to such expert advices to guide them in navigating the way towards returning to the classroom.

In this regard, we wish to highlight that the views made in this submission are all informed by a desire to reopen schools. The experience of going to school and interacting with others is essential to the development of the child, and classroom based learning ensures a consistent quality in the delivery of the curriculum. In common with all involved in the provision of education, we reiterate that the closure of schools and distance learning should not be regarded as normative and we look forward to the time when schools reopen and resound to the sound of children playing and learning.

We note that as part of the current 'phase 1' of the roadmap to reopening, the Government has produced a comprehensive guidance document for business's and employers. We suggest that this document provides a very useful starting point in our collective aim to produce similar detailed guidance for schools on the return to the classroom during the Covid-19 pandemic.

See: <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.pdf>

2. General Considerations

The reopening of schools to pupils in the midst of a global pandemic is a major challenge, especially given that we could yet see a 'second wave' in the transmission of the disease. A proposed September return date to the classroom **gives Government a preparation timeline of approximately 14 weeks** to map out a strategic plan.

There are some general decisions to be made in this regard namely:

- Should all schools return at the same time or would a **phased approach** be more practical?
- Should a **regional approach** to reopening be considered based on the fact that the transmission rate of the virus is less outside of the Dublin area?
- Should a **reduced school week** be considered for the first month (e.g. schools opening only on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday each week) to allow for deep cleaning of school premises and to deal with any issues that may arise from reopening?
- The level of scientific/public health advice available to schools locally.

Views from Schools:

In preparing for this submission, and noting the limited timeframe of one week, we contacted a number of schools and sought their views on how they would envisage their schools reopening for staff and pupils in September.

A common theme arose: **school personnel are not health care professionals and they need both clear guidance and practical support** if class based teaching is to be provided in a way that is safe to both staff and pupils.

There was a widespread concern regarding the liability that might attach to the school if a child or staff member (whether that staff member be a teacher, sna, caretaker, administrative, etc) contracts Covid-19 and the consequences be fatal. Many cited the scenario in a Dublin school in early March and expressed the view that they do not want to be “that school”. Many raised a concern around the views of parents and some doubted that parents would send their children to school should such a scenario arise.

However, others expressed the view that they welcomed the return to the “normality” of school life and thought it would be good for the children from a social, emotional and educational perspective. Others mentioned the difficulty of keeping up the dual role of being a parent themselves whilst trying to engage fully with their class through online means.

All schools contacted expressed the view that there was a need for clear communication and that this needs to be done in a more user-friendly way than, as one principal stated, “a weekly ticker-tape of complex circulars”.

A number of principals pointed out that the impact of the pandemic had meant that they had been pushed into managing a situation that created huge demands and expectations on them which, in their view, were well beyond those of the principal teacher. This view was particularly articulated by teaching principals. In that regard, it was highlighted that despite a national emergency being declared, no additional administration days were granted. Principals expressed the view that the expectation of both management and the DES that a principal and DP would manage all that is required to ensure a safe teaching environment without any additional resourcing is unreasonable.

3. Safety Measures, Hygiene practices and Risks of Surface Transmission

In considering how schools might prepare classrooms and the school building generally there are a range of issues to be considered at a more general level.

Social Distancing

It is immediately apparent that the implementation of social distancing will cause practical and logistical problems.

Will each child sit at a desk on their own?

How can a class of 26 (plus) be accommodated with social distancing?

Logically, this seems a physical impossibility. Classrooms can accommodate pupils in classes based on the allocation in a shared space at relatively close quarters to each other.

Classrooms cannot physically accommodate children 2 metres apart. Therefore, **the school**

day will have to be divided up which means that each child will probably only be in school for three hours per day. If ~~such~~ this is envisaged, ~~is the case~~, this would undermine the “economic” consideration regarding returning to school. Parents will still have to arrange for their children to be cared for at home for much of the working day and will have the added disadvantage of having to transport them to and from school (and perhaps twice, if one or more siblings were in other classes and in school for the “second session”).

In terms of staff, a protocol would have to be established regarding handwashing and how teachers are to interact with the school secretary and caretaker. This protocol needs to address how the staff room is to be used and accessed. The catering facilities available to staff would need to be carefully considered as would the daily cleaning of all surfaces. As mentioned above, the recently published return to work document may be of assistance in this regard.

Hand washing

A protocol will have to be established regarding the establishment of a routine for pupils coming to school that ensures good hand washing hygiene. This raises the issue of the availability of soap and sanitisers in the schools. Access to adequate hand washing facilities is an issue for many schools as many have only basic hand washing facilities with hot water not always available. Additionally, the time needed for each child to wash their hands must be factored into the practicality of children attending school whilst Covid-19 is still in the community. The risk of transmission from a child to an adult (e.g. a teacher or ancillary member of staff) will likely remain probable by September so this is an foreseeable risk that must be addressed.

Face masks

Will pupils and staff be required to wear masks?

If so, how will these be sourced? Who will pay for them and do they have to be of a certain model/type?

Will masks be disposed of daily (single usage) or will parents be required to wash them before the next day of use? How practical an expectation is this requirement on parents / guardians?

A protocol will have to be established regarding the use of masks for pupils, staff and visitors.

Sourcing PPE

If schools return to classroom based education in September, schools will need to be provided with various forms of PPE including masks, gloves, sanitizer and virus effective cleaning products. It is entirely foreseeable that with society returning to work and various other activities there will be an uptake in demand for PPE and other resources needed for protecting against viral transmission. The cost of such equipment may will rise significantly as the demand increases and the supply contracts. PPE equipment may become difficult to source and individual schools will not be in a position to source such equipment locally at a reasonable cost. The school’s procurement unit is best placed to procure and source supplies of PPE equipment for schools and we suggest the DES should engage with the SPU on this issue. If schools are to reopen in September this issue needs to be addressed by July.

Handling books and copybooks

Much of the junior infant curriculum is delivered through play and tactile methodology. This involves the use of multiple toys and play materials. In terms of objects used during teaching, a protocol will have to be established regarding the safe and healthy usage of these toys/objects and their cleaning. Guidance will be needed for schools also on the use of pens, pencils and crayons e.g. will these be single usage only?

In relation to the distribution and usage of text books and other hard copy material, a protocol will have to be established on the distribution and usage of these forms of material. It may be the case that **the safest method of submitting and correcting homework is online**. This will need to be considered and schools will need clear guidance on it. It is suggested that this may be a matter that the NCCA could advise on.

ICT equipment

In relation to ICT equipment, schools will need guidance on the cleaning of ICT equipment and advice will be needed on the type of anti-viral cleaning products that can be used on ICT devices. Usage of devices at home and school will need to be considered also in terms of the risk of transmitting the virus from ICT equipment.

Activities

With regard to activities outside the classroom, such as physical education, sports, drama or other activities, **it is difficult to see how these activities could be practically implemented or managed within the limitations of social distancing**. A decision will be needed from public health officials as to whether or not such activities can be safely undertaken.

4. Liability resting on Boards of Management

As the body that represents the Boards of Management of schools under the patronage of the Church of Ireland; Presbyterian; Methodist and the Religious Society of Friends, the level of liability which a Board is taking on in opening its school to pupils in the midst of a global pandemic is of concern. Boards will do everything possible to prevent the transmission of Covid-19 to both staff and pupils but a risk still remains and there is no guarantee that transmission of the virus cannot be prevented. Many Boards may therefore raise the question as to why they are taking on all the risk and liability for a Covid-19 related claim? Boards will need reassurance from the DES that the school will not be exposed should a child or a staff member contract Covid 19 as a result of their attendance or employment at the school.

Before school doors reopen in September, this matter must be clarified and, if necessary, expert legal advice sought.

5. Medical advice

Boards of Management and School Leaders will need access to public health and safety advice directly at a local level. Regional HSE staff must make themselves available to assist schools in practicalities of putting in place the infrastructure regarding social distancing and the implementation of health and safety procedures. Schools will need to be able to call upon a public health advisor to visit and review the school to ensure that it meets the necessary public safety requirements. Staff will be dealing directly with large numbers of individuals who will be coming from and returning to individual households, therefore should the temperatures of teachers and staff be taken on a daily basis before school and will school staff have access to Covid-19 testing?

What level of testing for Covid-19 will be available to schools?

What, if any, contact and trace protocols will need to be put in place?

6. Pupil care and wellbeing

An over-riding concern in considering returning to classroom based teaching is to ensure that children are not only safe and remain physically healthy but have good mental health also. Schools work to ensure that the school environment is a welcoming and happy place which children look forward to going to everyday. The limitations of social distancing will change that dynamic and the use of facemasks, gloves and other PPE equipment may combine to create an unnerving experience for some children. This may lead to a heightened sense of anxiety. Separation from parents, in the knowledge that there is a serious virus spreading through the community could lead some children to become anxious, stressed or worried.

Schools will need the support of NEPS and other psychological support and advice to prevent this occurring. Serious consideration must be given to putting in place a strategy to ensure that children do not feel intimidated or upset by the use of PPE equipment or social distancing. This could be as simple as having child-friendly masks (e.g. with colours and cartoon faces!) and using social distancing as part of a maths lesson or game. Schools will need advice on this from the experts in this area of expertise.

Pupils may well have experienced the death of a parent, guardian, friend or grandparent from Covid-19 before returning to school. Schools already have well developed protocols in place regarding grief and death. However, we suggest that these be reviewed in the context of Covid-19 deaths given that the pupil may not have been able to attend the funeral of their loved one and consequently may not have gone through an adequate grieving process.

7. Staff care and wellbeing

Covid-19 has affected everybody in different ways. As employers, Boards of Management will be seeking to support school staff in relation to anxiety they may have around Covid-19 and also seeking to provide compassion and pastoral care to those who may have suffered the death of a loved one. We suggest that staff care and wellbeing in response to Covid-19 be given focus prior to return to schools and that consideration might be given to producing a specific guidance document or booklet on support for staff (referencing the EAP, for example). We would welcome the opportunity to engage with the INTO and Forsa on this issue.

8. Parents and the “vox populi”

Parents are the primary educators of their children. In normal circumstances this role and duty is given to the school and this is supported in law. However, as has been widely acknowledged, we are not living in normal times. While it may be the case that the majority of parents will be in favour of returning their children to school by September, some parents may not be of the that view. Such parents may have good reasons for this decision such as a family member with a compromised immune system or other underlying medical condition.

The fact remains that at present there is no vaccine or anti-viral treatment available for Covid-19 and its affects may be fatal.

A decision will have to be taken regarding how to manage situations which might arise should parents take divergent approaches regarding returning their children to school.

Will schools be expected to manage the provision and delivery of school based classes-in parallel with online or remote learning. If so, why not continue on with online based education?

The attitudes of parents in relation to this issue in three months' time is impossible to predict. What is possible to identify is that the views and actions of parents will determine much of what happens regarding the return to class room based education.

It may be prudent for individual schools to seek the views of parents in mid-August on whether or not they wish to return their children to the classroom, should the public health advice be that it is safe to do so. This would allow Boards of Management to make the decision as to when they would return to classroom based teaching provision in a way that respects and works with the parent body of the school community. The principle of subsidiarity must be respected when it comes to taking a decision regarding what is the right thing to do for children. Decisions will depend on the virus transmission rate in late August.

Under current regulations, where a pupil does not attend school (where school is open) for 20 days this must be reported to Tusla. Whilst this has been waived for the course of the pandemic where there is engagement with schools, will this continue indefinitely?

9. The school day during a pandemic

In looking ahead to the return to the classroom, and assuming there will be a split day, it is useful to step through the school day to consider how, in a practical sense, the school day might operate where anti-viral procedures (such as hand washing, masks, non-surface touch, and social distancing are in place):

Will cleaning staff and/or teaching staff have to arrive into school early to prepare the school and the classroom?

What do they do with school bags? Do these need to be wiped and who does that?

Are masks to be worn by parents dropping children off if on bicycle/foot?

- Pupil drop off: will this be staggered to ensure that children do not enter together into the school or classroom? Pupils could be asked to enter first into the school hallway (or school hall if such is available) to allow for an orderly move to the classroom.
- When students get to class do they then line up and wash their hands?
- We estimate that pupil arrival and completion of physical hygiene may take about 45 minutes.
- This may allow 1 hour 15 minutes teaching time up to 11am

- Pupils will then need a break but if they leave their desks, the process for returning to class will take time, and social distancing will not be possible in the yard among children.
- By mid-day teachers will need to begin concluding lessons as the next group will need to arrive.
- We estimate that first group will need to leave the school premises at 12.15pm. to allow 15 minutes for collection and tidy-up of classroom and preparation for the next group.
- At 12.30pm staff will need to take lunch break.
- At 1pm next group arrive in the school hall/way and remain in school until 3pm.
- The school will then have to be cleaned thoroughly and prepared for the next day.
- Teachers may not be able to gather in the staff room together to ensure the non-transmission of the virus.
- The result is that children will receive only approximately 2 hours in school daily (10 hours per week).

A serious consideration therefore is whether pupils would receive more or less teaching time in class than if they continued their learning remotely in their homes.

10. Drop-off and Collection of Pupils

The drop-off and collection of pupils to school is mentioned elsewhere in this document however it merits specific focus in its own right.

Outside the school building, the biggest identifiable likelihood of interaction among people is with parents collecting and dropping off their children to school. **Strict protocols will need to be put in place regarding social distancing during collection and drop off.** It may be necessary for schools to put a “marshal” in place to regulate this high level of interaction. School traffic wardens will need training on how to implement social distancing while allowing children to cross the road. Given that schools may have to operate a “split” day, it is worth noting that should that be the case, school drop off and collection will have to occur twice daily.

Careful consideration needs to be given to the logistics of school drop off and collection and this may necessitate the employment of extra personnel (or the assistance of An Garda Síochána).

School Bus Transport.

How will social distancing work on buses and will more vehicles be needed?

It is vitally important that schools have clarity on how children will get to school in September.

11. SNA working and support for SEN pupils

The ability of the SNA to carry out their role will need to be reassessed if social distancing is to be observed. The nature of the role and work of the SNA in the classroom necessitates close physical contact with pupils. Similarly, SEN pupils will be used to having their SNA close by and it will seem strange to pupils for an SNA not to be able to move around the class freely and closely. This may prove to be a source of anxiety for some pupils.

We suggest that an expert group be established as a matter of urgency to consider this issue and to prepare guidance for principals, teachers, SNAs and parents; and to consider how this new scenario be explained to SEN pupils.

12. Finance and resourcing.

Schools are still operating on a pre-pandemic basis of funding and do not have the funds to equip the whole school staff and pupils with PPE equipment and neither do they have the resources to fund extra cleaning personnel, equipment (such as extra sinks) that may be necessitated by the introduction of public health measures to combat the transmission of Covid-19.

We suggest that a quantification exercise be done to assess the financial cost to schools of reopening during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The DES must look at a funding scheme for schools similar to that for business reopening after the recent six-week closure.

13. Summary Points:

The reopening of schools whilst Covid-19 is still spreading through the community presents a major challenge. Guidance and protocol documents need to be produced on the following:

- The approach to the beginning of term: a phased approach and what that might entail.
- How social distancing can be achieved with children
- The appropriate use of PPE equipment with children
- Sourcing, procuring, and purchasing of PPE
- Handling equipment, desks, books and resources
- The managing of pupil drop off and collection both in school and for parents
- Cleaning and sanitizing of the classroom and school building
- Staff care and well being
- Staff interaction and safety at work
- Pupil care and well being
- How an SNA can provide support with social distancing and related SEN matters

We are given to understand that other Education Partners have identified similar general issues. The DES have a record of working in partnership with stakeholders and we look forward to approaching these and other related matters in a collaborative way.

We also wish to highlight that the contents of the submission are based on the current situation regarding the rate of transmission of the virus (the R0 rate) which means that the position may change by the time that it is envisaged schools might return to classroom

based teaching in September. In that regard, the necessity for the support of distance learning cannot be assumed to not be needed after the summer period.

>ENDS<

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