



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

**Submission to the Joint Committee of the Oireachtas on Education, Further
and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.**

Regarding:

**“Ensuring that Schools are open in a manner which is both safe and
sustainable” during the (2020) Covid-19 pandemic.**

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1. Learning from the Coronavirus Pandemic – the last six months.

We welcome the invitation by Joint Committee to input into the considerations regarding the reopening of schools 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, schools adapted to remote/distance learning, which displayed not only the resilience and innovation of teachers, but their commitment to their pupils and strong professionalism. It is important therefore to note, that while the school building closed, the delivery of teaching and learning continued in the homes of pupils, provided and supported by their teachers and parents / guardians.

It is no exaggeration to say that the last seven months have been a learning experience for all involved in schools. Pupils had to adapt quickly to being at home while engaging in school remotely through digital technology in addition to the huge social and practical changes that accompanied that new reality. Not least, the inability to interact and play with their fellow pupils and friends; the loss of the daily interaction and socialisation had a significant negative impact in the lives of children. For teachers it marked a whole new way of delivering teaching and education. It meant engaging with a new IT methodologies and practices and, as mentioned above, all done in the space of a weekend. For school leaders, the last seven months have been a never to be forgotten experience of taking on an extra level of professional responsibility over and above that which could never have been expected or imagined before March 2020.

Preparing schools to reopen in August/September 2020 was a major challenge. Our initial consultations and discussions with our principals and Boards of Management indicated that there was a high level of anxiety regarding reopening and a myriad of difficulties and challenges were identified, not least, the need for enhanced cleaning regimes to be put in place (noting that the majority of our schools employed only a part-time cleaner). However, the extraordinary work undertaken by school leaders and Boards of Management meant that new cleaning regimes were put in place, PPE sourced, social distancing protocols implemented and schools reopened in as safe a way as could possibly be provided.

As the representative body for schools under Church of Ireland and Protestant management we have engaged on a weekly basis with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) since March 2020. We value these weekly meetings as an opportunity to exchange information and to input into the development of the guidelines to Schools on re-opening during the coronavirus pandemic.

We have not yet had the opportunity to brief the Minister for Education directly on the experiences in our schools over the last seven months in dealing with Covid 19. We hope that such a meeting will be afforded to us in early course in the same manner as the meetings afforded to other stakeholders.

Schools are open and are committed to remaining open where it is possible to do so. In an atmosphere of uncertainty about what lies ahead, this is a strong commitment to the national good and the public interest. It should not belie the fact that the next eight months are a step into the unknown and unknowable. Since receiving the invitation to make this submission, consulting with member schools and drafting the text of this submission, government has moved the nation to 'Level 5'. Such change in a very short space of time indicates the pace of change and fluidity of the current situation.

1.1 Research on the impact of the Coronavirus on primary schools

The impact of the pandemic will take time to fully appreciate and assess. However, since the pandemic 'hit' in March 2020 a number of research studies have been undertaken or are underway. This submission, in the comments below, draws on the available research along with consultations with a number of schools within our own network of primary schools. Researchers at Maynooth University conducted a survey with primary schools in the first months of the pandemic and this is now available. Entitled 'Irish Primary School Leadership During Covid 19, principals study report, 2020' (Burke and Dempsey, 2020) the report outlines the immediate challenges faced by schools in dealing with the onset of the pandemic and the move to online teaching. Researchers at Trinity College, Dublin have recently produced a report entitled 'Parent Perspectives on Teaching and Learning During School Closure: lessons learned from Irish primary schools' (Devitt, Ross, Bray, Banks; 2020) and this report gives an outline of the experiences of parents in moving to home based learning through online means. Further research by the School of Education at TCD on the impact of Covid 19 on the field of education is available at www.tcd.ie/education/research/covid19. As mentioned below, the impact of the pandemic on children with SEN is important to highlight. Research at DCU specifically on the effects of the move out of the classroom and to a home learning environment on children with autism is looked at in a recently published study entitled 'Autism Specific Transition Resources (T-Res Study)', (Smyth and McLaughlin, 2020). Also, as mentioned below, the impact of Covid 19 and the move to online based learning has exposed a range of social and educational inequalities. In this regard, researchers at the Geary Economic Institute, UCD have conducted research on the issue of Covid 19 related

inequality and access and this was recently presented in a research paper entitled 'Ireland's Covid 19 Crisis Response: perspectives from social science', (Burke, 2020). All of these research studies are available online. Submissions from other Education Partners may reference other recently conducted research.

2. Keeping Safe from the Covid 19 Virus – Our Priority.

Like all schools, Church of Ireland and Protestant schools are deeply anxious about pupils and/or staff member contracting Covid 19. While the expert advice is that the risk of transmission of the virus among children is low, this does not ameliorate the concern for transmission of the virus within the school's community among staff and pupils. It is worth noting that the staffing of a school extends beyond the teaching staff to encompass SNAs, caretakers, cleaners and secretaries. Boards of Management are conscious that, as employers, the responsibility for ensuring a safe working environment sits upon the Board. Principals and Boards of Management consulted in relation to making this submission advised that to date there is dissatisfaction with the level of information between the school and the HSE in both a specific incidence where a case of Covid 19 is confirmed; and more generally in regard to contact tracing in a locality. In a number of instances, principals informed us that they came to learn of a child having Covid 19 by a parent or through hearing of it locally. In one instance a parent was advised by a GP not to inform the school that her child had Covid 19 but to indicate that the child would not attend school due to another illness (such as a sore ankle). In general terms, a number of respondents consulted for this submission expressed the view that it is inappropriate for them to learn about restrictions that directly affect schools through media briefings or news reports (and often the information from the DES comes after the announcement – eg with the announcement of level 3 in Dublin and more recently Level 4 in Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan). However, others complimented the DES on how it has communicated with schools in recent months (though others highlighted that it is not helpful to issue communications to schools at 5pm on a Friday when most schools close before 3pm!). Keeping schools open has been given priority status by government and in that regard schools will continue to seek to remain open and will continue to implement the guidance regarding Covid 19 and find invaluable the advice available on: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/a128d-back-to-school>

However, it remains the case that even with the best of intentions and goodwill of all involved, Covid 19 could overtake the ability of a school to

maintain a safe environment. The following parts of this submission will look ahead to the challenges that are facing schools should the virus continue to spread throughout the community. We will also then turn to the further resources and supports that schools will need to remain safely open for pupils and staff.

3. Challenges to Remaining Open during the pandemic

In looking ahead to the remainder of the school year and towards June 2021; there are a number of challenges to schools remaining open during the pandemic that can be identified. Where a staff member contracts Covid 19 or is a close contact of a case of Covid 19 they cannot attend school. Provision has been made by Government for an increase in the budget to allow for substitute teachers to be employed in that scenario. Schools in this position will use the 'substitute supply panel' to source a substitute teacher to replace the absent teacher. This presents a number of challenges. Chief of these is the shortage of qualified substitute teachers. It is also the case that there is an obvious practical difficulty in sourcing a substitute teacher at short notice (sometimes the night before school opens!). The normal timeframe to 'book' a teacher on the teacher substitute supply panel is three days.

There are twenty schools in the 'cluster' for each substitute panel. This equates to 180 classes. We suggest that the Committee might give this further close consideration with a view to reducing the number of schools in a substitute supply panel cluster.

A further complication arises where a number of teachers are absent due to Covid 19 reasons. Given the daily rise in cases this is likely to be a more common scenario. As school leaders we must plan for the 'worst case scenario' which may arise. If we take the example of a four teacher primary school, one of those teachers will be the principal of the school. Should it be the case that all four teachers are absent from school at the same time, , who is the 'responsible' teacher on-site? It is inappropriate to expect a substitute teacher employed on a short term basis to act in a leadership role. Would parents be satisfied with this arrangement whereby there is no principal teacher 'on-site'? Given that 50% of primary schools under Church of Ireland and Protestant Management are four teacher or less, this scenario is of particular concern.

In our view this would pose a high level of risk for issues other than Covid 19 and a Board of Management may have to give close consideration to such a school moving to online teaching for the period of the absence of the majority of staff. While we accept that this viewpoint is at variance with that expressed

by Government, the responsibility for the safety of both pupils and staff rests on the Board of Management and they will take that responsibility seriously.

4. Internet Broadband, Connectivity and ICT

One of the issues that came to the fore for many of our schools during the initial closure and until the end of the school term was broadband connectivity and access to broadband around the country. This still remains a major difficulty if schools close or need to move to online teaching. Additional ICT related issues include access to an IT device for each child (although schools have since purchased IT equipment and this should not pose as much of a challenge as it did in March/April). Many schools have an Acceptable Usage policy in place regarding ICT however, full internet safety can never be guaranteed if a child is left unsupervised on the internet. In this regard we recommend to schools that a parent/guardian should be present if a child is engaging in online classes. However, not all parents can work from home and even where parents/guardians can work from home it is difficult to juggle work commitments while supervising their children at home.

Principals and teachers contacted for this submission highlighted that the level of engagement with online learning from home varied from child to child. Some children were in a position to engage well with online classes. However other pupils struggled to engage and a small minority of students were difficult to engage with. The impact of this varying level of engagement among pupils means that there is an element of 'catch-up' going on in schools currently with an element of re-teaching being found necessary. Should schools close again, the educational development of a cohort of students will be negatively impacted due to the barriers they experience for a variety of reasons in engaging with online learning. In this regard, it is fundamental that policy makers and government recognise that now is *not* the time to introduce any new educational initiatives into the education system. We welcome the indication from the Inspectorate of the DES that they are adopting a supportive role to schools currently and setting aside their quality assurance role for this school year.

5. Getting to School

The announcement of a move to 'Level 3' in recent weeks caused widespread disruption in schools due to teachers being delayed at Garda checkpoints. In some instances in Dublin, teachers and other staff were delayed by an hour in getting to school. Enforcement of 'Level 5' restrictions by the Gardai will, most

likely, see similar traffic checkpoints put in place. In April to June the 'lockdown' did not cause this logistical difficulty as teaching moved online. If schools are open during another 'lockdown,' teachers will need to be able to get to school through any Garda traffic check points easily. The same will be the case for parents dropping children to school and also for school bus transport. Government has deemed the keeping of schools open at 'Level 5' a national priority and school staff are therefore 'essential workers'

We suggest that strong consideration be given to the issuing of badges or stickers for cars (similar to that in use for healthcare workers) used by school staff to get to school. This would speed up garda traffic checkpoints, allow for prioritisation of essential workers, and bring a measure of control on the movement of traffic (since only essential workers should be travelling beyond the 5km radius).

In relation to school transport for students, we wish to highlight to the Committee that 'Level 5' will cause additional restrictions to public transport (from 50% capacity to 25% capacity). It will undermine the credibility of the advice of NPHET and Government if it is the case that public transport capacity is reduced but school transport remains at the same capacity. However, a reduction of school transport to 25% will have widespread effect on rural Ireland and on Church of Ireland and Protestant schools in particular who depend heavily on Bus Eireann transport due to the dispersed nature of its schools and the communities served by the schools.

6. Funding and Resources

Government has increased the funding and resources to the education sector significantly in recent months and Budget 2021 included a range of provisions to increase support to schools in delivering education to the pupils. It is noted that the budget allocation to the DES has increased by €1 Billion from budget 2020. This is welcomed and is a signal of the Government's commitment towards keeping schools open during the pandemic. We are mindful that not all of the costs involved in running a primary school are supplied by the State. In many of schools, parental contributions often match the amount of 'capitation' funds received from the State. We have identified a concern regarding the ability of parents to make this financial contribution towards the running costs of schools in 2021 (and thereafter) if the impact of the pandemic is to result in an economic recession. We would urge the Committee to give this dimension of the funding to schools' close consideration.

7. Focus on Children with SEN

Principals consulted for this study highlighted to us that children with SEN experienced particular difficulty in engaging with online learning (and specifically highlighted the challenge experienced by children with autism). It was also highlighted that the additional hygiene requirements of hand washing and/or hand sanitiser use and the management required around lunch breaks and any other type of 'movement' is now much higher than before. Time spent attending to such matters is time spent away from teaching and learning. It has been highlighted to us that in the past classroom assistants were employed via the 'FAS' scheme to help with the routine needs of children such as at lunch breaks, putting on coats and tidying the classroom etc. The Board is of the view that there is an opportunity now to re-imagine and reintroduce the classroom assistant to assist the classroom teacher with ensuring students observe proper hygiene in relation to Covid 19.

8. Wellbeing, Mental Health and Physical Health

We are greatly concerned about the wellbeing and mental health of the principals in schools. Principals will not have had the opportunity to take the usual annual summer holidays. Many principals experienced huge anxiety in relation to the responsibility for the safe reopening of schools. As the implementation of the reopening of schools occurred outside of term time, many principals would not have had the support of their deputy and middle management post holders.

9. Physical Education

Currently, schools have the ability to provide physical education (PE) outside. However, with the winter weather on the way, there seems to be little consideration as to how PE will be facilitated when the weather is bad and the school hall is unavailable as it is in use for classroom space (indeed many schools do not have school halls or access to large indoor space). The Committee may wish therefore to give consideration to how pupils are to undertake PE, which is also important for good mental health, when no indoor space is available in winter time.

We would highlight also that the continuous teaching on a daily basis with face masks is causing vocal strain to teachers as they must raise their voices to be heard. This is not acceptable in the long term and many schools are now considering purchasing radio microphones for use in the classroom. Funding for this equipment needs to be considered.

10. Teaching and Learning in a safe and sustainable environment

In this submission we have highlighted that while the Boards of Management and principals in schools are committed to sustaining the delivery of teaching and learning in the classroom, Covid 19 continues to present evolving challenges to the school system. In this regard, we have highlighted difficulties with regard to sourcing substitute teachers due to increasing absences. We have highlighted the challenges to ensuring safe and efficient travel for pupils and staff in a 'level 5' situation. We have highlighted the strain and anxiety the pandemic has caused to the wellbeing and mental health of both staff and pupils. We have highlighted the lack of broadband connectivity and IT availability that is an issue in some schools. We have also highlighted the challenges faced by a number of pupils to engage with online learning and the consequent detrimental effect to their educational development. In general terms however, it is the view of this Board, that the most important issue for schools in seeking to keep schools open during this pandemic is information and communication.

Schools need more information and guidance beyond the provision of basic statistics. Schools need information and descriptors as to how the virus transmits in schools. This needs to be science led and informed. Additionally, it is not ideal that school related information is on occasion disseminated through the media at first instance. This places schools on the back foot when approached by parents for advice and guidance as a result of the latest developments. As mentioned previously, it is also important that the provision of information and guidance from the DES is disseminated in an appropriate and supportive manner.

The Board wishes to thank the Joint Committee for the invitation to make this submission on this important issue and wishes it well in its deliberations.