



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

Planning for reopening schools in line with the Roadmap for reopening society and business.

Report to Government

12th June 2020

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Executive Summary

The *Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business* describes how the COVID-19 restrictions will be lifted. Phase 4 of the Roadmap sets out that educational institutions can open on a phased basis at the beginning of the academic year 2020/21 with a limited reopening provided for from Phase 2 on 8th June 2020. This report sets out the risks and impacts on children and society where access to education is significantly reduced. Having considered the wider impacts of school closure or significantly reduced operation of schools the Department considers that fully reopening schools for children is a clear objective for the end August/September.

Critical to the planning for reopening is the engagement with the Department of Health and the HSE in relation to infection prevention and control in a school setting. It is expected that the guidance will provide a broad overview of the requirements necessary to ensure a safe return to education for children and staff based on the current understanding of the disease in the context of the variety of school settings within the education system.

In this context it is noted that the limited international experience of reopening schools to date, albeit in a phased manner and with a very strong emphasis on infection prevention and control, has not been associated with a substantial deterioration in the profile of disease transmission in those regions.

The ambition of the Department is to develop a sustainable plan to reopen schools, the overriding objective of which is to protect the health of staff and students while promoting the educational and development needs of the nation's children.

The report also sets out in brief the other contingencies that must be considered during the coming period in the context of Covid-19.

It describes the optimum model for reopening schools, taking a risk based approach that will be worked through in detail in the coming weeks with education partners and wider stakeholders in society and in Government. The plan acknowledges the importance of continued constructive engagement with the public health authorities in seeking to ensure a safe and healthy environment for the school community and seeking to mitigate broader risks to public health in the community. This will also be informed by emerging research and other evidence, nationally and internationally as other countries reopen schools.

The following are the key activities underway to implement the optimum model for reopening schools:

1. **Overall objective** is to open schools in accordance with the normal start of the new school year to the fullest extent while minimising the risks from a public health perspective. Arrangements will allow for new routines to be established and bedded in within schools.

2. **Public health guidance** – Detailed engagement is underway in relation to development of public health guidance for school setting. This will be provided in time to facilitate operation of summer programmes and to enable detailed planning and preparatory work for re-opening of schools process. The public health guidance will be kept under on-going review and refinement if necessary in advance of the re-opening of schools at the end of August.
3. **Guidance and templates** to enable schools comply with the requirements of the national Return to Work Safely Protocol are being developed centrally in consultation with education partners. These guidance documents and templates will be published later in June and July. Draft guidance and templates will be available in time for use by schools planning to operate summer programmes.
4. **Awareness raising and training** – Guidance and on-line training modules, webinars etc. will be developed centrally and available for use by schools, parents and students etc.
5. **Enhanced cleaning regime** – Additional resources will be provided to schools to enable enhanced cleaning regimes to be put in place for operation of schools.
6. **Good hand hygiene** – The existing handwashing facilities in some schools are not designed for the enhanced level of handwashing envisaged necessary in Covid-19 environment without significantly impacting on educational class time. A drawdown framework will be established by the Department to enable schools purchase hand-sanitisers for use in the school and classroom. The procurement process for this framework is commencing immediately and it will also deal with any other potential PPE requirements. It is not envisaged that significant PPE will be required in school settings. Details on the additional funding for schools will be provided in due course.
7. **Mental health and Wellbeing** – There will be a strong focus on supporting mental health and wellbeing of students and staff during the initial phase of re-opening schools. Central guidance will be provided.
8. **Teaching and learning and curriculum:** The Department is working with the NCCA, the Inspectorate and other experts as appropriate to tailor teaching and learning appropriately to the needs of students as they reengage with school.
9. **Blended learning/alternative provision:** Notwithstanding our overall objective, planning for a blended learning approach (on-line/in school) will be a feature of the approach to planning to reopen schools as there may be circumstances where schools will have to have the necessary agility to respond quickly to changed circumstances at local, regional or national level. Planning is underway with the NCCA, the Inspectorate and other experts as appropriate on how best to manage and operate blended learning model.
10. **Consultation and Communication** – The Department will continue to engage closely with education partners and other key stakeholders on the development of guidance and supports for the re-opening of schools. A dedicated webpage will be

provided to enable the sharing of information and updates in an open and transparent manner.

Context

The *Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business* sets out how the COVID-19 restrictions will be lifted. Phase 5 of the Roadmap sets out that educational institutions can open on a phased basis at the beginning of the academic year 2020/21.

There are almost 1 million students attending school in the primary and post primary sector, across approximately 4,000 schools, in which close to 100,000 staff (teachers, SNAs, secretaries, caretakers etc.) are employed.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) is engaging in a process of detailed planning and stakeholder engagement to enable us to open schools to the fullest extent possible while minimising the risks from a public health perspective for both the school community and the wider communities that they serve. It is clear that the current period of school closures since March is having a negative impact on all aspects of children's progress and development, including wellbeing.

For Ireland, to extend a period of significantly reduced attendance in school for children will have far-reaching consequences beyond the current period of the Covid-19 pandemic. There will be immediate consequences for those in or commencing senior cycle as well as those entering primary or post-primary school for the first time in terms of their wellbeing, engagement with learning and peers as well as their future progress into further studies or the workplace.

The ambition of the Department is to develop a plan to reopen schools, the **overriding objective of which is to protect the health of staff and students while promoting the educational and development needs of the nation's children.**

In achieving that aim, the Department is taking a risk based approach, assessing the broader risks and impacts, in parallel with the public health considerations, which arise in the context of continued or partial school closures. A plan for reopening schools has to be both sustainable, in the event that Ireland is living with the presence of Covid-19 for the foreseeable future, while also being sufficiently agile and responsive to any peaks and troughs of infection that may be expected in the coming period.

In considering the reopening of schools from an educational policy perspective, the paper considers the logistical challenges which may arise and the impact these may have on the maintenance of a functioning education system. Access to equitable education is essential for children's social and emotional development as well as their academic attainment and Government needs to carefully consider the wider societal risks in continuing a reduction in education provision for a cohort of children in this respect.

Taking the above into consideration – the planning for reopening schools will be underpinned by the following broad principles:

- Maintaining the health, safety and wellbeing of the school community, including both staff, children and their families and the wider community to the greatest degree possible.
- Ensuring access to a minimum standard of education for all children, including vulnerable, hard to reach and marginalised groups.
- Maintaining access for particular groups as a priority when needed, including those preparing for state exams.
- Engaging with stakeholders within the school community and beyond to build confidence within the community about returning to school.

The Department is engaging with the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) for specific advice on prevention and infection control in terms of maintaining a safe, clean and hygienic environment in schools.

The Department also acknowledges that in terms of keeping schools open on an ongoing basis, that a robust system of monitoring, testing and control by public health authorities will facilitate an agile response to outbreaks in minimising the impact of closures to as few children as possible.

Introduction - Planning to Reopen Schools

The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out 6 over-riding principles as follows:

Safe	informed and guided by a public health assessment of risk
Rational -	includes consideration of the social and economic benefits and impacts of any modifications of restrictions and their feasibility
Evidence-informed	uses all of the data and research available to us to guide thinking
Fair	ethical and respects human dignity, autonomy and supports equality
Open & transparent	decisions are clear, well communicated and subject to the necessary checks and balances
Whole of Society	based on the concept of solidarity and supporting cohesion as we exit over time

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) provides an overall framework for a phased reduction of restrictions which underpins the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

The public health framework approach is to inform a gradual, step-wise and incremental reduction of the current public health social distancing measures, in a risk-based, fair and proportionate way with a view to effectively suppressing the spread of COVID-19 disease while enabling the gradual return of social and economic activity.

This framework also acknowledges that there are other important considerations regarding the reduction of measures that Government will have, such as social and economic considerations, adherence, public sentiment, acceptability, feasibility, overall population health & wellbeing and others.

The Department's approach to managing the public health aspects of re-opening and the operation of schools in a COVID-19 environment will have to consider the following:

- Guidance from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC);
- World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance as it pertains to school settings;
- Public Health Advice; and
- The Return to Work Safely Protocol¹.

It is recognised, in what is an evolving situation, that the public health advice and the Department's approach to re-opening and operation of schools, will also be informed through analysis of experience in other countries, including, but not limited to Denmark, Norway,

¹ As published by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation Most recent version dated May 9th

Netherlands, New Zealand and the UK, that have (or will have) re-opened schools in advance of the start of the forthcoming academic year in Ireland.

In formulating the plan for reopening school the Department will also consider the WHO guidance on *Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19* (the 'WHO Guidance') published in May 2020.

The Department's approach (and underpinning policies, procedures and systems) will have to provide for the necessary agility, to align with the public health objectives whilst enabling the education of our pupils to the greatest extent possible.

Managing the re-opening of schools is a massive logistical operation that will need to be carefully planned and managed.

The following section considers the wider impacts of school closures or continued diminished access to education for children.

Impacts of reduced access to schools

Impact of Remote Learning

There are very significant concerns regarding the equity of access to quality education for all children. The operational experience of both principals and parents since mid-March in the fully remote learning environment highlighted some of these impacts.

Through direct engagement with the Principals in the majority of primary schools and almost all post-primary schools by the Department the following themes have emerged:

- There is significant concern about the cost and availability of suitable devices for students, and the issue of poor broadband coverage. In DEIS schools in particular, a near total reliance on mobile phones and difficulties arising from their limitations as learning tools and from pay as you go credit have been cited as significant barriers to continuity of learning.
- Principals have expressed concern about inequity of access in the virtual learning environment (VLE). Practical issues arise also, where teachers and students live in broadband blackspots.
- Principals of schools for pupils with special educational needs are particularly concerned regarding the effectiveness of distance learning programme for SEN students
- Sustained and purposeful CPD is required for all teachers in the system to support online /remote teaching,
- Schools have made great efforts to promote student wellbeing. However, there has been great concern about students known to be living in difficult circumstances, students directly affected by deaths through Covid-19, and students with mental health difficulties already receiving school-based support.

Special education and remote learning

Distance teaching and learning presents a particular challenge for students with special educational needs (SEN), many of whom have limited capacity to engage with learning in a remote teaching environment.

Research carried out by Inclusion Ireland and AsIAm, both of which are advocacy organisations for children and young people with disabilities, identify a number of difficulties faced by children with autism and complex SEN in the current remote teaching and learning environment:

- Many families are experiencing stress with school closures particularly around teaching and managing child behaviours.
- The absence of health supports and therapies has a negative on the progress of these children.
- Children with complex health conditions are particularly vulnerable when out of school.
- Many parents do not have the time, capacity or a home environment suitable for home teaching and learning.
- The distance learning model does not always take account of children's individual needs and their capacity to engage with it.
- Variability in levels of support provided by particular schools is a challenge for some parents.
- The loss of school routine and relationships is experienced acutely by some children.
- The lack of equipment and quality of internet connectivity present challenges for online learning in many cases.
- The lack of books and other materials for home learning is a challenge for some.
- The closure of schools raises uncertainty for families regarding transitions of children particularly when they are due to move to a different education setting.
- Some families consider that going back to school will be a big challenge for their children.

Feedback from school principals indicates that they too have concerns about the effectiveness of the distance learning programme for children with SEN. They point out that teachers had little time to plan and prepare for distance teaching and learning before the closure of school buildings back in March. The need for specific professional development for teachers is referenced in this regard.

Research on regression suggests that children with more complex needs tend to regress more than those with less complex needs and take longer to catch up on their learning. For these students, regression in learning can occur across a number of areas of learning including language, gross motor, fine motor and self-help skills as well as in other academic subject areas.

Children with autism and special needs are among the most vulnerable in society and some are experiencing the impact of the public health restrictions including school closure and the cessation of education supports in a very significant way.

Impact on children and families wellbeing

Covid-19 has had a major impact on all of our daily lives and we have all had to adjust and adapt in the face of significant challenges. The pandemic, in bringing a real risk to the physical health of our citizens, has led to an understandable increase in worry and anxiety across society, which for many, has been manageable and tolerable, for a variety of reasons that include the collective national experience, societal recognition and response to the situation, including the government's *In this Together* campaign. Some children and families, however, have struggled more than others and have experienced loss and grief due to bereavement, or ongoing worry due to personal or family illness and concerns about the health of vulnerable family members. In this respect the families of some healthcare workers may have experienced a heightened perception of risk and fear of loss (Brooks, 2020).

The public health measures that have been put in place in Ireland as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, including the closure of all schools and the requirement for all to physically distance and largely stay at home, have resulted in additional challenges for all in terms of wellbeing/mental health, and for some more than others. School closure has, for some of our students, removed from their lives some of the key protective factors essential for their wellbeing, most especially the supportive structures and routines of school, that include the experience of belonging, connectedness and safety, together with access to support/resources and physical activity. School closure has also meant, for some of our students, an increase in exposure to key risk factors to their wellbeing that include stressful family situations (likely heightened by Covid-19 related issues such as home-schooling or unemployment), restricted access to friendships, increased social isolation and lack of access to services. Research suggests that the mental health/wellbeing of those with pre-existing mental health difficulties and special educational needs may be particularly at risk, at this time (Lee, 2020).

Supporting the wellbeing of school communities (students, school staff and parents) will be a key element of the plan for reopening schools.

Impact on curriculum delivery

The Department acknowledges the efforts of teachers, schools and families in continuing to work with children during the current period of school closure to promote learning. For a myriad of different reasons, this has been done to variable effect, some of which are set out above in relation to the impacts of educational delivery through remote learning. The Department is engaging with the NCCA to work through the implications of this current closure period on plans for schools reopening and to plan for blended learning in the event of future or rolling school closures or partial school closures to minimize the impact of these on children's learning at all levels of the system.

However, it is clear that maximising attendance of children at school should be a clear objective if this can be done in the safest manner possible. Otherwise, a prolonged period of diminished access to schools will have inevitable impacts for curriculum delivery that may have far-reaching effects beyond the Covid 19 pandemic.

Societal impacts

If students, particularly younger students are at home there is an ongoing requirement for parental supervision and impacts directly on the ability of parents to be available for work.

If there is delay in getting all students back to school then there is the potential for more significant wider Covid-19 risks to manage given older students are likely to be meeting up in an unregulated and uncontrolled environment.

Conclusion

The Department considers that a fully remote learning model is not a viable or appropriate long term approach, if at all avoidable, in the event of Ireland living with Covid-19 for the foreseeable future. Equity of access, lack of engagement and impacts on wellbeing, particularly for marginalised groups will always be an issue.

The Department, informed by the experience to date, will endeavour to improve and quality assure training, resources and equipment for online or blended provision. We acknowledge that this will have to be provided at the very least as a contingency for children who cannot attend school during a school closure or for health reasons

When looking at the wider impacts of reduced access to schools for children, it could be considered whether in any scenario other than in another full shutdown of society where all citizens will be at home, that the benefits of full attendance of children at school outweighs the risks of partial attendance.

Public Health Guidance – considerations for reopening schools

The following public health recommendations as referenced in the WHO Guidance and in the Return to Work Safely Protocol, are implementable in a school setting such that they will not impact on the majority of students to returning to school on full time basis.

- good hand hygiene,
- cleaning,
- good respiratory practices,

However the requirement to observe physical distancing imposes a direct constraint on plans to reopen schools. The physical size of our schools, and the number of individual classrooms within them, represents the most significant constraint to achieve a physical distance between students in the classroom.

It is important that public health clarity is provided on the need (or otherwise) of physical distancing in school classrooms. Attention is drawn to the WHO Guidance where there is a question on whether the physical distance between students can be maintained throughout the school day given normal student behaviour (particularly for younger students). It should also be borne in mind if students are not in the classroom there are wider societal impacts as follows:

- If students, particularly younger students are at home there is an ongoing requirement for parental supervision and impacts directly on the ability of parents to be available for work,
- if there is delay in getting all students back to school then there is the potential for more significant wider Covid19 risks to manage given older students are likely to be meeting up in an unregulated and uncontrolled environment.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) in its guidance on returning to schools has also highlighted that available data suggests that children are less often reported as cases than adults, and that the infection generally causes mild disease. However, it is acknowledged that this guidance also noted that the role of children in transmission remains unclear and that additional data is needed; the WHO committed to updating its document when more information becomes available, as lessons are learnt from those countries which have reopened schools.

The Department is engaging with the Department of Health and the HPSC to develop Guidance on Infection Prevention and Control for school settings.

In this context it is also noted that the limited international experience of reopening schools to date, albeit in a phased manner and with a very strong emphasis on infection prevention and

control, has not been associated with a substantial deterioration in the profile of disease transmission in those regions. The Department of Health has advised that this was the basis for the advice provided to Government on the 4th June that, from Phase 2 onwards, there could be a phased full reopening of school buildings and facilities generally to enable commencement of planning and delivery of educational programmes and activities, including formal education, and to allow the progression of specific programmes and initiatives for particular groups of children.

It is expected that guidance on infection prevention and control in school settings will be produced by the HPSC before the end of June. The guidance, which will not be without challenges to implement, given the variety of school settings, will assist with planning for the resumption of services in individual settings by providing a broad overview of the requirements necessary to ensure a safe return to education for children and staff, based on the current understanding of this disease.

Physical distancing requirements in school settings

It is important to note that physical distancing requirements are a function of public health advice intended to reduce the risk of infection at particular times and current guidelines are being kept under review.

If distancing requirements are required in a classroom setting in September, then there are clear impacts arising from infrastructural constraints such as class sizes, teacher and other staff availability and the physical space available in a school setting.

At primary level:

- **2 metres** in the classroom would result in almost all **pupils** attending school just **1 day a week**; and

At post-primary level:

- **2 metres** in the classroom would result in most **pupils** attending school **2 days a week**,

The impact of such a requirement on student's education and well-being are most extreme. Engagement in face to face in school provision of one day per week is detrimental to the delivery of meaningful education. Students will be at home 4 out of 5 days and expected to engage in blended learning. The educational impacts and the well-being impacts are outlined in more detail below.

At primary level:

- **1 metre** in the classroom would result in almost all **pupils** attending school **2 ½ days a week (50% attendance at school)**;

At post-primary level:

- **1 metre** in the classroom would result in **some year groups** attending school **50% of the time** and other year groups attending school at or near a full-time basis

Engagement in face to face in school provision of 50% in school and 50% blended learning has very serious impacts to the delivery of meaningful education. Students will be at home half of each week and expected to engage in blended learning.

The requirement to observe physical distancing imposes a direct constraint on plans to reopen schools. The physical size of our schools, and the number of individual classrooms within them, represents the most significant constraint to achieve a physical distance between students in the classroom. Teacher supply will also be a significant consideration.

It is important that the Department engages further with this aspect of public health advice in developing the optimum model for school reopening set out in the next section, giving due consideration to other mitigating factors in a school setting and how emerging evidence on infection transmission by children to adults may also mitigate some of the risks considered as part of broader public advice.

Attention is drawn to the WHO Guidance where there is a question on whether the physical distance between students can be maintained throughout the school day given normal student behaviour (particularly for younger students) and how supporting measures can be taken to minimize risks within the school community and the wider community.

A differentiated approach to physical distancing in schools versus requirements for other parts of society or business could be considered appropriate and reasonable when the particular nature of the school environment is considered:

School Environment Context includes:

- i. the closed and known community nature of the school environment,
- ii. For many children, segregated nature of travel to and from school from the wider public, including cars, cycling and walking and school transport.
- iii. the effectiveness/practicability of compliance of physical distancing measures in schools given 'normal' student behaviour
- iv. the potential effectiveness of other complementary public health measures (or additional public health measures) which can be applied in schools.

School capacity and teacher supply

The physical size of our schools, and the number of individual classrooms within them, represents the primary constraint to achieve physical distance of 1 to 2 metres between students in the classroom and to continue to accommodate all the students within the school at the same time. Ireland is unique in terms of most other EU countries given its peak enrollment numbers in primary schools which are just now moving into post primary.

It is not feasible, from a cost, sustainability or delivery perspective, to identify and implement the additional classroom capacity (through pre-fabricated units, construction work) across each school. Some schools will be in a position to re-purpose GP Halls / PE Halls to make some additional capacity or access local and community resources and this of course will be a factor in terms of maximizing available capacity, this will not be a panacea for the physical distancing constraints highlighted above and will at best make some marginal improvements.

It is also not feasible to consider the wholesale splitting of classes and recruiting extra teachers – given that there are significant teacher supply issues currently.

Optimum model for reopening schools – an outline

Introduction

In the context of a return to school for all children and subject to health advice, school settings would operate to maximise physical distancing outside of the classroom but there would not be a requirement to maintain a specific distance within a classroom group. However, every effort would be made to be achieve as much physical distance as practicable within the physical, staffing and resource constraints in operation.

This would result in schools reopening for all students and has the least impact on the provision of education beyond the current period of school closure.

The application of physical distance requirements in other part of the school (such as the school yard) or between staff and between staff and other adults, can be applied.

Every effort can be made to restrict movements within the schools, confine students to class groupings/bubbles, arrange staggered drop off/pick up times etc.

Other measures that are the subject of planning and the development of protocols and guidance include:

- increased hand washing/sanitising (and associated facilities);
- Enhanced cleaning regimes (in line with DEBI Protocol and ECDC guidance²);
- if unwell stay at home regimes; and
- Restricted movements within schools, confined to class groupings/bubbles, staggered drop off/pick up times etc.
- the effectiveness of the contact tracing regimes that can be applied in schools if an outbreak occurs;
- the effectiveness of immediate identification and isolation procedures which could be applied in schools;

² See ECDC Technical report. Disinfection of environments in healthcare and non-healthcare settings potentially contaminated with SARS-CoV-2. ECDC 2020.

Implementing the Return to Work Safely Protocol:

In line with the protocol, COVID-19 induction training will be mandatory for all school staff. Each workplace will appoint at least one lead worker representative charged with ensuring that COVID-19 measures are strictly adhered to in their place of work.

Guidance and templates will be developed centrally to enable schools to:

1. Develop and/or Update the COVID-19 Response Plan
2. Develop or amend policies and procedures for prompt identification and isolation of workers who may have symptoms of COVID-19, as appropriate
3. Develop, Consult, Communicate and Implement Workplace Changes or Policies
4. Implementing the COVID-19 Prevention and Control Measures to Minimise risk to Workers

Before returning to work, the relevant pre-return to work steps should be put in place and completed by both the school management and staff. How best to address these requirements are being discussed with stakeholders and the Department.

Hand Hygiene in Schools:

Proper hand hygiene must be implemented in schools. Training on good hand hygiene will be developed centrally and provided to schools for students and staff. It is recognised that the existing handwashing facilities in schools, are not designed for the enhanced level of handwashing envisaged necessary in post COVID-19 environment without significantly impact on educational class time.

It is anticipated that it will be necessary to install hand-sanitisers in every classroom in every school in the country, and to enable the supply of sanitizer fluid for each school to cater for 1 million students and circa 100,000 staff using it a number of times each day. It is envisaged that this will be managed via a drawdown framework for use by schools to purchase sanitiser etc. Given the supply issues and lead in times, the procurement process is being initiated. today and it will also deal with any other potential PPE requirements.

More regular and enhanced cleaning regimes will need to be adopted in each school. There are costs implications of this which are unavoidable and the Department will engage with DPER in this respect.

Enhanced cleaning regimes in schools:

In line with the requirements of the ECDC Guidelines it is necessary to put in place enhanced cleaning regimes in Schools, including increased frequency and scope of cleaning regimes in schools. Consideration of arranging for enhanced waste disposal regimes in schools will also be necessary.

Health and safety education of staff and students:

An education programme will be designed, tailored to the pupil audience, and delivered to all pupils and staff on good respiratory etiquette, hand hygiene and other health and safety matters in the school environment.

The Department is working with stakeholders to develop consistent policies and procedures for the screening and management of sick students, teachers and other school staff in line with guidance for the civil and public service which may include:

- Enforce the policy of “staying at home if unwell”
- Ensure students/school staff who have been in contact with a COVID-19 case stay home.
- Establish procedures for students or staff who have symptoms of COVID-19 or are feeling unwell in any way to be sent home or isolated from others.
- Enhanced substitution and supervision arrangements for teachers for such scenarios;
- Inform parents about the measures the school is putting in place and ask for cooperation to report any cases of COVID-19 that occur in the household. If someone in the household is suspected to have COVID-19, it is important to keep the child home and inform the school.

Getting children safely to school

The Department is engaging intensively with Bus Éireann, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the National Transport Authority on the logistical considerations that arise from public health advice in planning for the reopening of schools.

In urban areas, this will mean supporting the NTA in promoting various alternative means for children to get to school in a safe way, including walking and cycling and more generally in reducing the impact on the public transport system of school reopening. In rural areas, it will mean careful planning for the rural school transport scheme and SEN transport, which may have to operate under constraints due to the very significant cost and fleet impacts that may arise from physical distancing guidelines in place in transport at the time of reopening. Estimated impacts and other additional costs which will arise from hygiene and cleaning measures are under consideration by DES in consultation with Bus Eireann, the NTA, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and DPER.

Initial return to school:

While schools endeavored to provide remote teaching in line with the expectations and advice set out in the Continuity of Learning Guidance documents developed by the Department in consultation with the education partners, the approaches, extent and impact in supporting students varied, as did student engagement and progress in learning during

this time. Accordingly, in the new school year, students will need time to settle back and reconnect with school life and teachers will need time to establish where students are at in their learning across the range of curriculum and subject areas.

The initial priority will see schools focusing on the wellbeing and socialisation of the children in addition to health and safety issues. Teachers will play a key role in engaging with students as they re-enter schools to assess where they are in terms of their learning and planning their teaching and delivery appropriately. The Department recognises that children coming into primary or post primary school for the first time will need particular support and is working with partners, including DCYA and the ELC sector, in that respect. In that context also we will work with school communities to provide an opportunity to mark the departure of the 6th class students of 2020 from their primary school communities.

The Wellbeing of School Communities

The wellbeing of our school communities is a fundamental element of the Department's overall plan to ensure a successful return to school as we continue to manage the Covid-19 pandemic. Students, school staff and parents need to feel safe, calm and connected in order for meaningful engagement with learning to take place.

The response to support the wellbeing of all within school communities on the return to school will require a structured, psychosocial response which is compassionate and largely preventative and proactive. This requires a whole-school approach to planning in order to ensure that students, school staff and parents feel safe and secure. This response will be aligned with the HSE guidance on such responses, and based on the five key principles of promoting a sense of safety, calm, connectedness, self- and community-efficacy and hope. A tiered model of support is recommended with a strong universal focus, based on the knowledge that people are naturally resilient and most will adapt with the provision of basic practical and empathetic supports while acknowledging some groups will need additional and more intensive levels of support. In this regard the Departments of Health and Children and Youth Affairs will play a key partnership role.

Support provided by this Department will utilise the usual school support structure – the Continuum of Support. This support structure allows schools to provide universal support for all students, using prevention and early intervention to support wellbeing and transition back to school. The Continuum of Support framework also recognises that some students - those groups who are at risk or who have emerging needs - will require more targeted support, while others who have complex and enduring needs will require an individualised approach to support, taking a developmental perspective, and adapted to the individual needs of the student.

NEPS, with key sections of the Department and the Inspectorate, will work with stakeholders to develop in detail appropriate responses at universal, targeted and individual levels that will

be offered to schools to help them support the wellbeing of their school community upon school re-opening.

Ongoing planning for other contingencies:

Teaching and learning and the curriculum:

Teachers will be required to continue to adapt their lesson planning and pedagogy to provide for a blended approach to teaching, learning and assessment as a contingency measure. The Department is working work with the NCCA, the Inspectorate and other experts as appropriate to tailor teaching and learning appropriately to the needs of students as they reengage with school.

Supporting learner re-engagement -priorities identified

The Department, in consultation with relevant agencies, including the NCCA, identifies the following key priorities in supporting students in re-engaging with the curriculum in the new school year:

1. The wellbeing and socialisation of students
2. Assessing where students are in terms of their learning
3. Identifying the additional supports that particular learners may require
4. Exploring options for remote provision that will compliment in-school provision and address curriculum gaps experienced during school closure

It is recognised that schools continue to be best placed to make decisions about how to support and educate all their learners during this period. The Department will be working Department in collaboration with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to develop guidance to schools to assist them in their planning so as to ensure that curricular priorities are delivered and that teaching and learning is optimal in these circumstances.

Blended Learning/alternative provision:

It is recognised that for students vulnerable to the disease, attendance at school may not be possible. The Department also recognises that given the potential for an upturn in the disease (and/or a second wave) that 'stay-at-home' may have to be re-introduced (at a school, region or national level). Therefore a blended learning approach (online / in school) will necessarily be a feature of the approach to *planning to reopen schools* and will have to provide the necessary agility to respond very quickly to changed circumstances at a local, regional or national level.

This agility and responsiveness will also have to enable a tailored and graduated approach at, individual school level; a town level, a county level, a regional level and a national level.

To a greater or lesser extent, schools may be required to provide both in-school and remote learning support during the coming school year. This approach to learning which combines face-to-face and remote learning experiences is known as blended learning. Digital

technologies play a significant role in supporting teachers and students in a blended learning environment.

Resources and webinar training have been provided to schools by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) in the use of digital technology to support learning.

In that context the Department together with the NCCA is working towards:

1. Identifying an appropriate blended learning models for individual school contexts
2. Adapting the delivery of the overall curriculum in the context of a blended learning environment
3. Providing specific advice on particular curriculum subjects and programmes
4. Maximising the use of digital technologies to support a blended learning approach
5. Supporting and enhancing the role of parents/guardians and other partnerships

Ongoing actions

The Department will continue to engage with the NCCA and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) to ensure the development of further learning resources to support schools and teachers in developing CPD to support the particular challenges of teaching that are best suited to online schooling and blended learning.

Key actions include:

- **Guidance:** The NCCA will provide overarching guidance on how the curriculum can be differentiated
- **Curriculum advice:** The Department's Inspectorate, in collaboration with the Department's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit, will develop more detailed advice on operational aspects of curriculum implementation
- **Supporting the readiness of the teachers** to work in new ways and to use technology in lesson preparation and delivery
- **Supporting access to technology in the school and home**
- **Providing further guidance to parents**
- **Training and support programmes for teachers in the use of digital technologies**

Conclusion

Having considered the wider impacts of school closure or significantly reduced operation of school the Department considers that if possible to do in a safe way, fully reopening schools for children is a clear objective for the end August/September. However the Department acknowledges that to do that will require:

- Assurances in relation to public health risks and mitigation to build confidence within the school community of teachers, staff, parents and children;
- Significant measures to ensure hygiene and infection prevention and control; extensive training for staff and communication with families to promote those measures;
- Attention to promoting children's wellbeing in returning to school; and
- Intensive engagement with stakeholders in planning to reach this objective.

Stakeholder engagement

As outlined managing the re-opening of schools is a massive logistical operation that will need to be carefully planned and managed throughout the coming months. Schools will require clear guidance and early clarity on key issues so that they can plan at a local level.

The Department has received detailed submissions from the education partners and is meeting on a weekly basis with key stakeholders. Structured engagement will continue through the summer with key stakeholders and targeted discussions with education partners, including management bodies, unions, parents and students to identify and address their concerns.

As part of this engagement the Department is working with stakeholders to develop centrally provided consistent training, guidance and protocols to support and assist schools in their planning for return. Public health advice and wider Government developments will feed into this process as it becomes available to the Department.

A fundamental element to enable the development of this plan to reopen schools is public health guidance on the matter of physical distance between students in the classroom and advice on how the Department can minimize health risks to the school and wider community within the constraints set out in this report.

Communications

The Framework for Reopening and Operating School will require communication and engagement on two levels:

Firstly, in line with the Return to Work Safely Protocol, the key to a safe and continued return to work, and re-opening of our schools requires strong communication and a shared collaborative approach between employers and workers and wider education partners. In addition to the education stakeholder's wider consultation with other parties including Bus Eireann, DTTAS, National Transport Authority, HSE, and DCYA will be required. As the plan for reopening schools is progressed, an extensive communication and engagement strategy with all pupils, parents, staff and the wider public on how the re-opening of schools will be managed in a way which protects the health of staff and students while promoting the educational and development needs of the nation's children will be rolled out (July and August).

Experiences in Other Countries

UNESCO³ have reported that as of 11 April 2020, state wide school closures were implemented in 195 countries impacting 1,578,336,788 learners. As of June 2020, country wider school closure stood at 144 countries impacting 1,186,127,211 learners.

The Minister and the Department are continuing to engage with other countries, including at an EU level, to learn from their experience. Although the educational context in Ireland is different, lessons can be learned through examining the impact of the re-openings from three perspectives (i) impact on the transmission of the disease; (ii) phasing for the re-opening of schools; and (iii) operational matters in the delivery of learning in this context.

It is on this basis, there is a significant benefit in agreeing from both a public health perspective and an educational perspective the most relevant comparator countries to monitor and consider in an in-depth way.

The comparator countries which be most relevant are:

- The United Kingdom, as our nearest neighbour has begun to re-open schools for some year groups from June 1st;
- Belgium; schools initially opened on a partial attendance basis in May but some primary schools are now reopening in full to children without social distancing. However other measures have been put in place including hygiene protocols and parents are not allowed into the school building.
- Denmark, which has a similar population size, initially closed its schools during the same time period (12 March) as Ireland, and began a process of phased re-opening from April 15.
- Norway, given it closed its schools in early March, began a phased re-opening of schools from April 27 and opening all schools in early May.
- New Zealand, which has similar population and school building infrastructure as Ireland, which closed schools on 24 March and re-opened again for all students from Monday 18 May (notably as part of guidance to schools, the following guidance was given regarding physical distancing

“Where possible, children, young people and staff should be far enough away from each other, so that they are not breathing on, or touching each other. This must be accompanied with good hygiene practices and regular cleaning of commonly touched surfaces. There does not need to be a specific

³ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

measurement but where practicable 1 metre can be used as a guide, particularly between adults”

and

- The Netherlands, which closed its schools on 16 March, and phased reopening of half class groups from May 11. The Netherlands has a social distance guidance of 1.5 metres.

Conclusion

It is important to note that, at the current time, although there is some clarity on measures that have been implemented in those countries, there is limited research findings to date on the public health or educational impacts of these measures. However, it is acknowledged by the Department of Health that more evidence will become available in the coming period and will inform public health advice as it emerges.

Ireland remains in close contact with other EU Member States and is being updated regularly on practices in other countries.