



**IPPN Submission to the Joint Committee on
Education, Higher and Further Education, Research, Innovation & Science**

Ensuring that schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable

21st October 2020

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1 INTRODUCTION

This submission captures the issues, concerns and suggestions of Irish primary school leaders in relation to ‘ensuring that schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable’.

Since they reopened their buildings in late August, schools have done a remarkable job in creating the safest possible environment for the children in their care. IPPN would like to acknowledge the support that schools have received from the Department to facilitate them to reopen. However, it is an evolving situation and it is essential that we learn from the experiences of schools in order to keep schools open and, most importantly, to maintain a safe environment.

As you may be aware, IPPN made a previous submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19 Response in June and a presentation to the Committee in July 2020 in relation to the safe reopening of schools.

A number of key priorities were included in that submission and we reiterate those points that have not, in IPPN’s view, been adequately dealt with in the intervening period that are impacting schools’ ability to manage the risks effectively. We also highlight a number of issues that have arisen in schools since they reopened in late August. The Committee’s attention to these issues is very welcome and we hope that our submission and recommendations will be helpful in the Committee’s deliberations.

We remain at the Committee’s disposal should they feel that they require any further information in respect of any of the items put forward.

2 A BRIEF SUMMARY

Before we list the key issues and some proposed solutions, we would like to set out a very clear and concise summary prepared by a very experienced school leader running a large urban school, as this encapsulates many of the issues and provides real examples of what works well and what is not working so well.

“I am moving from being very hopeful about the ability of schools to remain open to a position of being fearful - fearful for our pupils, our staff and indeed our school communities.

Inside school, we have been able to manage to stick to the guidelines, which were very detailed and useful when they came out:

- *We have pods, that keep children working in small units*
- *The bubbles are staying apart, one from the other*
- *Hand hygiene practices are still being maintained rigorously.*

So internally, I would say, schools are managing to stay open by following the recommended guidelines.

But that’s only half the story....

*I would argue very strongly that, in order to remain open, our schools have to be supported by a robust Public Health response that keeps the virus out of school and that identifies the cases where the virus gets into school in a timely manner- this isn’t just an add-on, this is **essential** if we are to keep schools open.*

This public health response has two aspects:

1. *Keeping the numbers down in the wider community, which means adherence to the public health guidelines and compliance with public health advice*
2. *A testing and contact tracing system that is fit for purpose and staying ahead of the virus.*

I fear that in relation to both issues, we are failing.”

Appendix A sets out this school leader’s personal experience of contact tracing. He continues:

“What this highlights is that there are two weaknesses in the system:

1. *Inconsistent advice from GPs under pressure: The GP had recommended the teacher return to school. Had the principal not intervened, the teacher would have been in school on Monday, shedding virus, ahead of becoming unwell and testing positive.*
2. *The delay in the contact tracing system is also unforgivable. Close contacts to teachers, who are also teachers, have to be picked up quicker, if we are to keep schools open.*

If schools are to remain open, we need the support from everyone:

- *Full adherence to public health guidelines and a concerted effort to reduce the incidence of COVID-19 in the communities where we operate. We have evidence daily in our school of parents flagrantly violating this advice. This is unsustainable.*
- *We need a Public Health team, testing system and contact tracing regime that is fit for purpose and up to the task. Right now, they seem to be totally over-whelmed.”*

3 ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the feedback we have received, it is clear that it is very difficult for principals, deputy principals and school Boards of Management to manage the risks around COVID-19 and incidents of infections in their schools, and to deal with all of the ramifications. The following are the key issues raised, and suggestions and recommendations to resolve them.

3.1 NO SCHOOL SHOULD LOSE A STAFF MEMBER OWING TO COVID-19

No school should lose a teacher owing to a parental decision to keep children at home due to their concerns about COVID-19 ('explained absence'). A significant number of schools have raised this issue with IPPN and we sought clarification from the DES in relation to how this would be dealt with regarding 'September returns'. In relation to developing schools, the issue is more critical, as they are at risk of losing their additional teacher in the short term. The implications for class sizes during a pandemic are clear – having fewer teachers in fewer classes is not helpful.

3.2 HSE CONTACT TRACING AND GUIDANCE TO SCHOOLS

Many schools from across the country have contacted IPPN notifying us of often significant delays in the HSE's response to queries relating to confirmed and suspected cases. Principals who have spoken with public health officials report that the HSE is dealing with a backlog of cases in schools and unable to meet the stated time frame for contacting schools. This is a cause for grave concern and must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

When a school leader is made aware of a suspected or a confirmed case, s/he is under severe pressure to communicate with the school community as word is spreading unofficially, which often creates panic. The template letters approved for circulation to the school community do help. However, we know of at least one case where a Board of Management felt it had no option but to close the school owing to the number of confirmed cases notified to it by parents and staff with no HSE guidance or support available to them in a timely manner, despite repeated attempts to contact the HSE through the regional email and phone numbers provided. Other schools have resorted to contacting the public health doctor through emergency services, such is the level of concern about further spread due to the time taken by the HSE to contact schools with guidance.

Frequently-asked questions are a very useful resource but they don't give reassurance to the wider school community that a consultation with public health official would provide. IPPN set up an out-of-hours helpline to support school leaders dealing with these issues and have dealt with more than 100 schools who have had difficulty contacting the HSE, particularly outside normal office hours. In addition, our Leadership Support Team has dealt with in excess of 1,000 queries relating to COVID-19 since schools reopened.

A further issue arises where the HSE requests the school principal to contact parents to provide details of the date and time of COVID-19 testing, and suggesting that parents don't take calls from the HSE. This is a departure from the guidelines and is not something schools should be requested to do. Other concerns were raised when the HSE did not ask whether the pupil(s) concerned availed of school transport, as this would greatly increase the risk of spreading the virus given that the advice is that primary-age children do not need to wear masks. IPPN has real examples of all of these issues if the Committee wishes to look at them in any further detail.

It is fair to say that the current situation in relation to HSE contact tracing, guidance and testing is having, and will continue to have, a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of all school staff, on the wider school community, and especially on school leaders. As one principal put it *'This is not a safe reopening, leaving aside the possibility of becoming infected with COVID-19, the burden on school leaders is unacceptable.'*

A number of recommendations relate to this issue:

3.2.1 A dedicated HSE public health schools advisory service

A dedicated HSE public health schools advisory service, manned at least 12 hours a day, seven days a week, is required, with sufficient capacity to deal with all queries. Some school leaders have reported no response to queries raised even during official opening hours. Others have received notice of a positive test at 11 pm, so these hours of operation are required. School leaders need to know that if an issue is brought to their attention inside or outside of school hours, there will be support available to them.

3.2.2 HSE Capacity

The HSE needs sufficient staff to make calls to those who need to be tested, and not request that school leaders make calls to schedule tests on their behalf.

3.2.3 HSE Training

All HSE staff or their contractors need to be adequately trained to ensure that contact tracing is carried out in full e.g. to ask all the relevant questions to identify all potential close contacts of a confirmed case, such as use of school transport.

3.2.4 Standard questions to be asked of all schools

When there is a confirmed case in schools there appears to be a lack of consistency in the approach from public health officials. The questions asked during the Public Health Risk Assessment appear to vary from school to school. Schools should be issued, as a matter of urgency, with a standard set of questions that they can expect to be asked if they have a confirmed case.

3.2.5 Guidance re. contraventions of public health guidance

Some schools are experiencing difficulty with some families in relation to the public health guidance. Additional guidance to schools is needed to outline what actions are required when a family is in contravention of public health guidance.

3.2.6 Sharing of school data with the HSE

Some school leaders are asking why the Primary Online Database (POD, to which all schools upload their data) cannot be utilised to share data with the HSE. For example, a portal could be developed to facilitate the sharing of contact information. Schools are asked to provide spreadsheets of data to the HSE which could readily be provided through a technical solution, which would speed up the tracing process. There are clear legal and data protection ramifications that would need to be considered.

3.3 COVID-19 TESTING

The designation of close contacts within schools must be addressed. Where there is a confirmed case of COVID-19 in a school, school leaders are requesting that testing of entire classes be done as standard. Without clear communication from the HSE in relation to the rationale for the decision-making process around testing, this is the only way that school staff and parents will have confidence that keeping schools open is safe.

3.4 PRIORITISATION OF TESTING

It is imperative that school staff members are prioritised for testing to ensure that they are available for work at the earliest possible opportunity. If schools are identified as a key priority, then that needs to be reflected in the testing process.

3.5 TEACHING PRINCIPALS NEED ADDITIONAL TIME TO FOCUS ON LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, PARTICULARLY THOSE WITH SPECIAL CLASSES

It is widely agreed that the workload of principals is unsustainable, and that teaching principals in particular are not in a position to focus sufficiently on leading learning as well as teach full-time. The pandemic has increased the administrative responsibilities of all principals. The increase in release days for teaching principals to one day per week is very welcome but is insufficient in many schools, due to the level of work overload, especially where there are suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Teaching principals whose schools provide special classes are in a critical situation, as the work involved in leading and overseeing special classes is significantly more onerous than that involved in leading and overseeing teaching and learning in mainstream classes. Simply put, primary schools operating special classes cannot be classed in the same way as a mainstream school with the same number of classes. To quote one teaching principal with three special classes, they want to have *‘a chance to do the job we were put in place to do and to deliver the best education possible, both for our mainstream classes and the children in our special classes.’*

Our recommendations in this regard are as follows:

- Teaching principals with special classes to be given administrative status – in line with DES policy up to the mid-1990s
- Additional leadership and management days to be given where a school is managing suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 to facilitate all of the additional communication and administration involved. This would reduce the impact on the pupils in the teaching principal’s class, whose learning is likely to be severely impacted.

3.6 SCHOOL LEADERS’ WELLBEING

Primary school leaders have not had a break since schools were closed in March. Most, if not all principals spent the entire summer preparing their schools for reopening and putting all of the required measures in place. Members have told IPPN that the pressures of unrealistic Departmental expectations have added to the stress they have been experiencing during the pandemic. For example, it is unrealistic to expect a principal to facilitate training staff in remote teaching strategies while at the same time teaching in a pandemic environment. This is particularly the case for teaching principals who teach full-time in addition to their leadership and management responsibilities.

The Department levels expectations on school leaders to look after the expectations of pupils, staff and others in the school community, without considering how school leaders’ own wellbeing can be

managed and supported. The additional supports recommended in this submission would go a long way towards alleviating some of these pressures. Research conducted by Dr Philip Riley of Monash University in relation to the health and wellbeing of Irish primary school leaders drew attention to the stark reality of the negative impact of the leadership role of principalship on their health. These pressures are a significant factor in the low number of applicants for the position of primacy school principal, which is even more evident when the vacancy is for the position of teaching principal.

3.7 CLARIFICATION OF THE 'ADDITIONAL PROTECTIVE MEASURES' TO KEEP SCHOOLS SAFE

Urgent clarification is required regarding the 'additional protective measures' that will be in place to keep schools open and safe during Level 5 restrictions. Many pupils and staff are medically vulnerable or have close family members who are, although they may not reach the criteria for 'very high risk' to allow them to work from home. How will they be protected, given the increasing transmission rates around the country?

3.8 PHYSICAL DISTANCING

Where a school cannot implement physical distancing according to the guidelines due to large class size and/or small classrooms, further consideration should be given to how the safety of pupils and staff can be effectively managed.

3.9 PROVISION OF SUPPORT TO SCHOOLS WHO WISH TO UPSKILL IN RELATION TO REMOTE LEARNING

Every school should be offered the opportunity to upskill. This process should be led by the PDST, supported by principals.

3.10 ACCESS TO THE INTERNET AND PHYSICAL DEVICES TO FACILITATE DISTANCE LEARNING

Remote learning is an aspect of provision that needs considerably more resourcing, especially as the number of outbreaks continues to increase. Maynooth University conducted research in conjunction with IPPN, PDST and INTO in April and in May and a key finding was the small yet significant percentage of staff and pupils who did not have adequate broadband/internet connectivity and/or sufficient devices in the home to facilitate remote learning. In many schools, the ICT grants provided to schools are inadequate to enable them to provide devices and internet access for remote learning owing to the number of families who require them. This is particularly the case in disadvantaged communities and in schools supporting large numbers of Traveller and Roma pupils.

The procurement frameworks for devices were very welcome. However, a number of schools have already exhausted whatever resources they had to support families and have no facility to provide further supports. There is no clear approach for schools to support families and staff with internet access, and this is an area that needs immediate attention.

3.11 FUNDING OF EXTRA COSTS RELATED TO COVID-19

There is huge additional and ongoing expense for PPE, cleaning products and cleaning staff, much of which has been facilitated by the additional resourcing provided. However, schools are reporting additional costs over and above these - for water and waste disposal - which has not been factored into the calculations. Further grant funding will be required to ensure that schools can pay for such additional costs.

3.12 SCHOOL TRANSPORT

As noted above re. HSE contact tracing, there is considerable concern that the risks of infections relating to school transport are not being taken seriously, especially as primary-age children are not required to wear masks. School buses must be regulated properly, with assigned seating as per guidelines and checks that this is taking place.

3.13 SUPPORT BY THE INSPECTORATE

Support must be provided to schools in keeping their school buildings open and safe for staff and pupils – in a collaborative, rather than an inspection-based approach. The involvement of school inspectors in relation to HSA compliance was very disappointing given all the stress schools are under, which could have been alleviated by more supportive, guidance-based involvement by inspectors in schools. We appreciate that the Inspectorate did not wish to involve themselves in COVID-19 compliance checks in schools. Nonetheless, it was a shock for school leaders who need positive engagement, support and guidance from school inspectors.

3.14 TWO CRITICAL ISSUES

It is also worth reiterating two very important points raised in our June submission to the COVID-19 Committee:

3.14.1 No new initiatives

No new initiatives can be introduced in primary schools in the 2020/21 school year - to respect school staff who must prioritise getting their schools up and running in very changed circumstances – this will be sufficiently challenging for the next school year.

3.14.2 Inspections should be paused

Inspections need to be paused for the rest of the school year. The role of inspectors should be temporarily changed to support schools to get back up and running and to restore normality.

Appendix A - A Principal's experience of contact tracing

[Note: this is the recent experience of a real principal running a large urban co-educational primary school with more than 400 pupils and 35 staff]

"I want to share a positive experience firstly. School practices can help:

- *In our school, we monitor attendance; where a child is absent on the 3rd day, we contact home*
- *If a child is sent for testing, we take a note of this*
- *If a child is sent for testing, we give parents our contact details and ask them to keep us informed*
- *In this way, we are vigilant and keeping a watchful eye*
- *In the event of a positive test, parents are urged to let us know; we can then become involved in the process, and assist contact tracing to do their job more effectively.*

An example of where this has gone well:

- *On Thursday last, we were made aware that a child was sent for testing*
- *On Friday evening, the parent told me that the child had tested positive*
- *I have direct mobile for Public Health nurse in our area: I made contact on Saturday morning, a risk assessment was carried out by mid-day and the parents of children in the POD informed*
- *Children were tested on Sunday*
- *Results back on Monday morning.*

*This is an example of schools and Public Health working together, with positive outcomes for everyone. **This is how it should be!***

Examples of where contact tracing has broken down

- *Monday 5th October: Parent of a child in a special school is made aware that the taxi driver bringing their son to school has tested positive for COVID-19*
- *This child only gets tested on Friday the 9th October with a positive COVID-19 result on Saturday the 10th*
- *Friday 9th: The remaining family members are asked to restrict movements and await an appointment for testing*
- *Tuesday 13th: School contacts parent: still no test date given*
- *Wednesday 14th: School contacts parent: still no test offered*
- *Thursday 15th: Mother offered a test at location X, daughter an appointment at location Y and the oldest sibling not given any appointment*
- *Thursday 15th: school principal contacts Public Health to raise his concerns, finally family get tested together that evening*
- *Friday 16th: Mother informed that she is COVID positive*
- *Saturday 17th: Mother informed her daughter is also positive*
- *Monday 18th: Mother informs school that daughter is positive. School principal phones his designated public health contact. A risk assessment recommends that the POD be removed from school **10 days** after initial contact.*

This delay in testing is just unacceptable. It undermines all of the hard work of the school and destroys trust in the system.

Another incidence of delays in contact tracing:

Sunday 11th October: teacher phones principal to say her housemate, also a teacher, has tested positive for COVID-19. She has phoned her GP who tells her that she is not a close contact as they were not together on Friday the 9th. The school principal challenged this recommendation from the GP and recommends the teacher restricts her movements, pending contact from Public Health.

She did not receive any calls from contact tracing on Monday 12th, Tuesday the 13th, or Wednesday 14th. It is not until Thursday 15th that she is called by contact tracing, to say she is a close contact - this delay again completely undermines the system.

On Tuesday, the 13th, the teacher starts to feel unwell, she contacts her GP. He recommends a test, which takes place on Wednesday the 14th. She tests positive for COVID-19 on Thursday the 15th.”