

Uch fo



Tithe an  
Oireachtais  
Houses of the  
Oireachtas

**Tionchar COVID-19 ar an mBunoideachas agus  
ar an Meánoideachas**  
An Comhchoiste um Oideachas, Breisoideachas agus  
Ardoideachas, Taighde, Nuálaíocht agus Eolaíocht  
Eanáir 2021

**The Impact of COVID-19 on Primary  
and Secondary Education**  
Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher  
Education, Research, Innovation and Science  
January 2021





Seirbhís Thithe  
an Oireachtais  
Houses of the  
Oireachtas Service

**AN COMHCHOISTE UM  
OIDEACHAS, BREISOIDEACHAS AGUS ARDOIDEACHAS,  
TAIGHDE, NUÁLAÍOCHT AGUS EOLAÍOCHT**  
Tionchar Covid-19 ar an mBunoideachas agus ar an  
Meánoideachas

**The Impact of Covid-19 on Primary and Secondary  
Education**

---

**HOUSES OF THE OIREACHTAS**

**JOINT COMMITTEE ON  
EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION,  
RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE**

33/ES/2

**Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education,  
Research, Innovation and Science  
An Comhchoiste um Oideachas, Breisoideachas agus Ardoideachas,  
Taighde, Nuálaíocht agus Eolaíocht**



**Rose Conway-Walsh TD  
Sinn Féin**



**Alan Farrell TD  
Fine Gael**



**Paul Kehoe TD  
Fine Gael  
(Chairperson)**



**Carol Nolan TD  
Independent**



**Jim O'Callaghan TD  
Fianna Fáil**



**Marc O Cathasaigh TD  
Green Party**



**Donnchadh Ó  
Laoghaire TD  
Sinn Féin**



**Aodhán Ó Ríordáin TD  
Labour Party**



**Pádraig O'Sullivan TD  
Fianna Fáil**



**Senator Aisling Dolan  
Fine Gael**



**Senator Eileen Flynn  
Independent**



**Senator Rónán Mullen  
Independent**



**Senator Fiona  
O'Loughlin  
Fianna Fáil(Vice – Chair)**



**Senator Pauline O'Reilly  
Green Party**

# Table of Contents

<b>Chairman’s Foreword</b> .....	5
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	7
<b>Engagement with stakeholders</b> .....	9
<b>Introduction</b> .....	9
<b>Ten Key Recommendations</b> .....	11
<b>Module 1: Ensuring that schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable</b> .....	13
Witnesses.....	13
Introduction .....	13
Sustained Reopening of Schools.....	13
Engaging students, parents and staff.....	15
Ensuring better communication .....	16
Adequacy of school facilities.....	16
Supports for special needs provision .....	17
At risk students and staff .....	18
Online and blended learning.....	19
Teaching Resources.....	19
School transport .....	20
Reporting a Covid-19 case .....	21
Contingency plans for school closures.....	22
<b>Module 2: Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and Leaving Certificate 2021 Preparations</b> .....	23
Witnesses.....	23
Introduction .....	23
Preparations for 2021 Leaving Certificate.....	23
<b>Module 3: Other issues</b> .....	24
Witnesses.....	24
Introduction .....	25
Use of Reduced Timetables in Schools .....	25
School Bullying and Cyber Bullying during Covid-19 .....	25
Educational Disadvantage .....	26
<b>Appendix 1: List of Submissions</b> .....	28

## Chairman's Foreword

---



The Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was established in September 2020. From the outset, the Committee recognised that the impact of Covid-19 on Primary and Secondary Education, was an urgent priority and undertook to examine the key issues in a timely way.

The Joint Committee agreed to produce a compilation report on 3 key areas:

- Ensuring schools are open in a manner that is both Safe and Sustainable;
- 2020 Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and 2021 Leaving Certificate Preparations, and
- Other issues such as the use of Reduced Timetables in Schools; Cyberbullying and Educational Disadvantage, which have had a significant impact on young people.

The Committee recognises the great suffering young people have endured this year and acknowledges their great positivity and resilience in returning to school and continuing their education in very challenging circumstances. It also recognises the trojan work performed by the other members of the school community. School Principals and their Deputies, Teachers, Special Needs Assistants (SNA)s; School Secretaries and Parents Associations have managed to provide children and young people with an education despite enormous challenges. All of you should be very proud of what you have done for your country.

The Committee held a number of meetings with key education stakeholders on the issue of Ensuring schools remain open in a Safe and Sustainable way with Teachers and other School Staff's Unions; National Parents Council (Primary and Post Primary) and the Irish Second level Students Union (ISSU). In particular, the engagement with ISSU gave a voice to young people and the Committee intends continuing to involve young people as much as possible in its work. The Joint Committee also discussed the issue with Ms. Norma Foley, TD, Minister for Education, at a meeting to discuss her key priorities.

On the issue of the 2020 Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and 2021 Leaving Certificate preparations, Officials from the Department of Education briefed it on 2020 Leaving Certificate Calculated grades and, specifically, a) The Calculated Grades Process b) Measures that are in place to review the process and to Indemnify students who were wrongly graded and d) Preparations for 2021 Leaving Certificate. Ms. Norma Foley, TD, Minister for Education, also engaged with the Committee on this issue at the same meeting to discuss her key priorities.

The Committee also sought a briefing note from the Department of Education on (a) progress made in implementing the recommendations in the Covid 19 Report pertaining to the reopening of schools (b) medium term plan to ensure schools remain open and (c) response to the issues raised at Committee meetings to date, that examined the impact of Covid 19 on the education system.

The Committee met with Department of Education Officials regarding the use of Reduced Timetables and key academic staff from Dublin City University (DCU) regarding School Bullying including Cyberbullying and Educational Disadvantage. I would like to express gratitude to DCU for their tremendous support and service to the Committee.

Lastly, I would like to thank Don O'Leary, Director, Caoimhe Cotter, student and Rhys Wooten, past student, Life Centre, Cork for a truly inspirational engagement with the Committee on Early School Leaving and Alternative Education and to Rhys and Caoimhe for their courage and honesty.

Arising from this, the Committee examined the evidence heard and the submissions received and drew up this Report containing concrete and feasible recommendations. The Committee genuinely believes these can be implemented without delay and will impact positively on the whole school community in a substantive and sustainable way. The Committee is committed to ensuring these recommendations are implemented as expeditiously as possible.

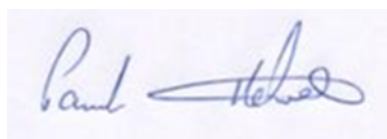
On 14 January 2021, the report, as amended with Members individual contributions, was agreed.

The Joint Committee is grateful to all those who were involved in the work on such fundamentally important issues that affect all of the nation's children The Joint Committee expresses its gratitude to all those who came before the Joint Committee to give evidence and to those who took the time to make written submissions. It is also grateful for the cooperation and sustained assistance from Department of Education Officials, and particularly, Mr. Neville Kenny, Departmental Liaison Officer.

The Joint Committee asks that immediate action be taken to implement the recommendations in this report. It is imperative that these key national issues are treated as a matter of top priority by the Department of Education. This is essential to ensure that the Irish primary and secondary education system continues to provide world class education to all children and young people in an equitable manner.

Young people are our future. This Committee is determined that it will play a role in making sure that all young people benefit from educational opportunities that will ensure they have a bright, hopeful future. It will make Ireland a better country that cherishes all our young citizens potential and recognises their contribution to this nation.

The Joint Committee also requests that the issues raised in this report be the subject of a debate in both Houses of the Oireachtas.



---

**Paul Kehoe T.D.,**

**Chairman,**

**Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.**

**January 2021**



## Executive Summary

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and public health advice, primary and post-primary schools have been identified as an essential service by the Government. *Reopening Our Schools: The Roadmap for the Full Return to Schools* outlines a comprehensive range of measures to support the full reopening of schools. The HSE notes that evidence suggests child to child transmission is uncommon, and not the primary cause of infection in children.

Primary schools receive significantly less funding than secondary schools and there is a specific issue regarding the number of School Management posts. There is now a need for a review of the short-term funding needs of schools but also a more fundamental review of funding needs so that the requisite school management is in place to provide quality leadership for the whole school community.

Engagement with parents and students is essential to the continued success of schools remaining open. Parents have reported some anxiety around schools remaining opening, with one major worry being the quality of communication between the HSE, schools and parents and students. Students also warned of the widespread social isolation experienced by many during the pandemic.

Many schools lack the space or classroom size to properly implement social distancing. Guidance is required for schools in this situation.

Ensuring correct ventilation, particularly during winter months, is also a serious concern. Teachers and children cannot teach and learn if they are very cold. Ventilation Monitoring Systems need to be installed in all classrooms.

Over half of principals reported an increase in Special Educational Needs since schools reopened, possibly due to the loss of engagement, skills, learning and human connection during the March to May period. There are also concerns regarding the ability of Special Needs Assistants to maintain social distance, and if they cannot, they should be provided with appropriate PPE as a matter of course.

Online learning took on a new and significant prominence during the period of school closures. It is important that any skills gap in delivering online learning among teaching staff are addressed, as well as ensuring full access to online learning resources to all students. To this end, online learning must be standardised across the country so that all students have the same opportunities in terms of their learning experience. The Department of Education must lead on this initiative and budgetary resources must be made available to ensure it can be effectively implemented.

Public health recommendations must be reinforced in the area of school bus travel, particularly for SEN students. Bus drivers and escorts must also be provided with appropriate PPE.

Contingency planning for future potential school closures should be undertaken with all relevant stakeholders. Delays in a response from the HSE to school queries requesting guidance on Covid-19 cases could lead to schools being forced to close.

In 2020, Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades were introduced as an alternative to the traditional Leaving Certificate examination, because of Covid-19. There are concerns that some students may have been wrongly graded. The Department of Education has initiated an Independent Review of the Process. The Review needs to be published expeditiously so that any outstanding issues can be addressed and the process future proofed.

Changes are to be made to both the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021, with the aim of providing more choice and flexibility to students. These changes will also be designed to take account of the disruption to learning students have experienced due to Covid-19.

In addition, there needs to be a fundamental review of the Leaving Certificate to examine the need for far more continuous assessment, more vocational options and to identify best international practice.

The publication of guidelines on the use of reduced hours timetables has been delayed, due to the Department of Education focusing on the safe reopening of schools. Early publication of these guidelines is imperative to ensure that Reduced Timetables are used as was the original intention and not for any other reason.

School Bullying and, specifically, Cyber Bullying increased during Covid-19. Young men in the 15 to 18 age group were particularly affected. While cyber bullying may be viewed as an out of school issue, it impacts adversely within the school environment. Teachers need proper training and supports to assist in combating this issue.

The evidence strongly demonstrates that additional supports to disadvantaged and vulnerable students can be transformative in terms of educational outcomes and life chances. These include the provision of emotional counselling and support; hot meals, arts services; participatory outdoor learning and sustainable funding for DEIS schools and alternative educational settings for early school leavers. The provision of emotional counselling and supports and hot meals was identified as 2 key measures that should be extended to all schools to ensure that children in non DEIS schools do not fall through the cracks. In fact, Emotional Counselling Supports and a National School Meals Programme should be an integral part of the education system as is the case in other countries.

## Engagement with stakeholders

1. Key stakeholders in the education system were identified, and oral and written evidence was provided to the Committee across the three modules below;
  - a) **Module 1:** Ensuring schools remain open in a manner that is both Safe and Sustainable;
  - b) **Module 2:** 2020 Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and 2021 Leaving Certificate Preparations;
  - c) **Module 3:** Other Issues
2. This report is structured in line with these three modules and reflects the oral and written evidence provided by stakeholders.
3. The Joint Committee heard oral evidence for Module 1: Ensuring schools remain open in a manner that is both Safe and Sustainable; and invited written submissions from relevant stakeholders. A list of the organisations who made submissions is outlined in Appendix 3.
4. The Joint Committee heard oral evidence for Module 2, Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and 2021 Leaving Certificate Preparations. Evidence outlined in submissions received for Module 1, regarding the Leaving Certificate, also informed the content for this module.
5. The Committee heard oral evidence for Module 3 on other issues which were impacted by Covid 19.
6. Given the severe Covid 19 restrictions; the tight time frame for completion and the breadth of those involved in education, it did not prove feasible to meet all stakeholders. The Committee focused on identifying key witnesses for public hearings. The evidence and findings contained in the written submissions received form an integral part of Module 1 of this report. The witnesses that the Committee heard oral evidence from are referenced under each module in this report.

## Introduction

7. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and public health advice, the education sector, and specifically, primary and post-primary schools, have been identified as an essential service by the Government. The *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021 Plan for Living with COVID-19* states that keeping schools, early learning and childcare services open, is a top priority.
8. To date, the National Public Health Emergency Team has reviewed the national experience of schools reopening and has recommended that schools remain open even during Level 5 restrictions.
9. A key reason for keeping schools open, as noted by the Department of Education (the Department), and as advocated by the World Health Organisation (WHO), is that closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family and societal level. Also, as noted by the Health Service Executive (HSE), investigation of cases identified in school settings suggest that child to child transmission in schools is uncommon and not the primary

cause of Sars-CoV-2 infection (the virus that causes Covid-19 disease) in children. The HSE further note that adults (e.g. Principals, teachers/school staff) are not at higher risk of Covid-19 in the school setting than in the wider community or household.

10. Covid-19 caused significant disruption to the 2020 Leaving Certificate. The Department of Education made the decision to award students Calculated Grades in September 2020 with the option for students to sit a conventional Leaving Certificate examination in November 2020. Considering the significance of the decision, and the facts issues had arisen, Module 2 examines 2020 Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and, very importantly, the 2021 Leaving Certificate Preparations and future considerations.
11. Covid-19 has also impacted on the implementation of new policy initiatives in schools and, specifically, the implementation of the proposed Guidelines on Reduced Timetables for Schools. The Joint Committee met with Department of Education Officials, following on from the former Joint Committee on Education and Skills, who published an Interim Report on the issue.
12. Senior academic staff from Dublin City University (DCU) National Anti Bullying Centre came before the Committee on the issue of School Bullying and specifically Cyber Bullying and Internet Security during Covid-19 as did the Director of the DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre regarding System Supports for Educational Disadvantage.
13. This report highlights the key impacts of Covid-19 on primary and secondary education and makes concrete and feasible recommendations.

## Ten Key Recommendations

1. The Department of Education should undertake a **Review of Primary and Secondary School Funding**, to include:
  - An assessment of the short-term additional funding needs, at both primary and secondary level.
  - An assessment of the disparities between primary and secondary level funding with a view to closing the gaps and ending the disparity.
  - An assessment of School Leadership posts at Primary level, with a view to aligning the number of leadership posts with equivalent posts at secondary level.
  - Consideration of the need for additional AP1 posts at secondary level with a more equitable allocation of Deputy Principal posts across schools of different enrolments, beginning with DEIS schools.
2. **The Education (Student and Parent) Charter Bill, 2019** should be enacted as expeditiously as possible and then fully implemented as a key priority of Government
3. **Air Monitors/Meters should be installed** in all primary and post primary schools by end December 2021.
4. The Minister for Education should formally request the Minister for Health to instruct the HSE to undertake **a review of the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) guidance for vulnerable students and families**, including a review of the risk assessment and attendant categorisation.
5. The Department of Education should develop **A National Online Learning Programme**, to be rolled out to all primary and secondary schools, as a matter of urgent priority, to include:
  - One centralised Learning Platform;
  - Appropriate support and training for all principals and teachers and parents who are home schooling;
  - Remote device purchase that ensures disadvantaged students have access to devices for online learning;
  - Adequate broadband for online learning;
  - Provisions for Blended Learning, and
  - Transition Measures for Schools as the Plan is rolled out
6. **The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report** should be published by end June 2021 with due regard to the need for continuous assessment, increased vocational options and international best practice.
7. The Department of Education should publish the **Final Guidelines on the Use of Reduced Timetables** in Schools, by end March 2021.

8. The Department of Education should **update the 2013 Anti-Bullying Procedures** for Primary and Secondary Schools to include guidelines for addressing homophobia and transphobia.
9. **Emotional counselling and therapeutic supports** should be provided in all primary and secondary schools as an urgent priority.
10. The provision of hot meals to vulnerable students should be expanded to cover periods of school closures and holidays and **a Hot Meals Programme** should be rolled out nationally to all schools on a phased basis.

## **Module 1: Ensuring that schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable**

### **Witnesses**

14. On 17 November 2020, the Committee met Ms. Norma Foley TD, Minister for Education and Ms. Josepha Madigan, TD, Minister of State with Responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion, to discuss the Minister's key priorities, and, inter alia, the effects of Covid-19 on 'Ensuring that Schools are open in a manner which is both Safe and Sustainable'

The debate can be accessed [here](#)

15. On 19 November 2020, the Committee held a roundtable discussion with ASTI, INTO, TUI and FÓRSA on the same topic.

The debate can be accessed [here](#)

16. On the 26 November 2020, the Committee held a further roundtable discussion with the National Parents Councils-Primary (NCP) and Post Primary (NCP) and the Union of Secondary School Students (USSI). on the same topic.

The debate can be accessed [here](#).

The Committee received a written briefing note from the Secretary General of the Department of Education covering, *inter alia*, (a) progress made in implementing the recommendations in the Covid-19 Report pertaining to the reopening of schools and (b) the medium term plan to ensure schools remain open.

### **Introduction**

17. The Committee are aware of the enormity of the task undertaken by school managements, staff and students to ensure the success of the reopening of schools after the prolonged closure from March until August 2020. Principals and Deputy Principals, throughout the summer months, in cooperation with educational partners and the Department, undertook significant work to create safe environments for students to return to school.
18. The Committee are also aware that the urgent challenge now is how to build on the good work undertaken to date and keep schools open safely in a manner that is sustainable while ensuring that schools continue to get the requisite support.

### **Sustained Reopening of Schools**

19. Schools are supported through *Reopening Our Schools: The Roadmap for the Full Return to Schools* (the Roadmap), which outlines a comprehensive range of measures to support the full reopening of schools. The Health Service Executive (HSE) reports in its submission that schools have implemented the recommendations for safe reopening generally very well.

20. The HSE states that investigations of cases identified in school settings suggest that child to child transmission in schools is uncommon and not the primary cause of infection in children particularly in preschools and primary schools. Most secondary cases identified within school settings were through staff to staff transmission.
21. In this regard, the HSE notes that maintaining all public health recommendations, particularly social distancing for all staff members throughout the school day, including at break times and in the staff room is very important.
22. Considering the significance of challenges outlined in the submissions, the Committee considers that there is now a need for the Department of Education to review the need for sustainable school funding to keep schools open in a safe and sustainable way.
23. The Joint Managerial Submission (JMB) raises the issue that fee-charging schools were initially excluded from automatic entitlement to financial aids to support reopening, led to difficulties in promptly implementing proper health and safety procedures. While financial support was eventually provided, there may need to be a reassessment of the manner in which decisions are made regarding the provision of financial assistance to these schools.
24. This Review should assess funding needs, at both primary and secondary level. A common theme in submissions is the fact that primary schools receive significantly less funding than secondary schools. This was clearly articulated by the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) in both its submission and oral evidence to the Joint Committee on 5<sup>th</sup> November 2020. This anomaly needs to be addressed with a view to arriving at a permanent solution.
25. The Joint Management Body (JMB) recommends increased AP1 posts of responsibility, or an equivalent in terms of hours for flexible deployment, to support the additional leadership and management functions demanded by reopening, recovery and renewal of school communities a more equitable allocation of Deputy Principal posts across schools of different enrolments, beginning with DEIS schools.
26. From the submissions. It appears that there is a need for sustained funding, with definitive draw down dates to ensure that school managements can plan in a focused way.

**Recommendation:**

1. The Department of Education should undertake a Review of Primary and Secondary School Funding, to include
  - An assessment of the short-term additional funding needs, at both primary and secondary level,
  - An assessment of the disparities between primary and secondary level funding with a view to closing the gaps and ending the disparity.
  - An assessment of School Leadership posts at Primary level, with a view to aligning the number of leadership posts with equivalent posts at secondary level.
  - Consideration of the need for additional AP1 posts at secondary level with a more equitable allocation of Deputy Principal posts across schools of different enrolments, beginning with DEIS schools



## Engaging students, parents and staff

27. The difficulty of implementing public health measures in the student population is highlighted in the University of Limerick (UL) submission. It expressed concerns, that some adolescents may not comply with social distancing and mask wearing when they are unsupervised. Conversely, the submission identifies the impact of 'anticipated regret', to encourage safe behaviours i.e. knowing that your behaviour may transmit the virus and cause considerable suffering to other people. It advises that the most effective preventative strategies for young people must involve them.
28. The Irish Secondary Schools Students Union (ISSU) submission contends that the pandemic has resulted in widespread social isolation and lack of communication with other students. Some students may thus be inclined to disregard public health advice and meet with their peers in uncontrolled settings. In order to avoid this, schools must provide a safe place for students to engage casually and informally with their peers.
29. The Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) submission highlights the need for society (including parents, guardians and young adults) to play its part in keeping schools open. it advises that parents and guardians must keep their children home from school if they have any Covid-19 symptoms and cites reports of parents not adhering to the guidelines.
30. The National Parents Council Primary (NPC) and National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP) informed the Committee that most parents and students prefer that schools remain open and thus children's routines can be kept as close to normal as possible. However, some anxiety remains around the safety of school transport; mask wearing and ventilation.
31. The Education (Student and Parent) Charter Bill, 2019, which involved extensive consultation with relevant stakeholders, has been due to be enacted for an extended time period. The provisions contained in the Bill would go a considerable way to resolving the issues around parent and school engagement with individual schools. The Committee is very keen to see this legislation enacted expeditiously.

### Recommendations:

2. The Education (Student and Parent) Charter Bill, 2019 should be enacted as expeditiously as possible and then fully implemented as a key priority of Government.
3. Department of Education should issue a Circular to all Post Primary Schools, making it mandatory to:
  - provide a designated Recreational Space for students to engage with their peers while on breaks in school.
  - nominate a School Student Council Official to act as a Covid Compliance Representative, attending all school management Meetings relating to Covid-19.

## Ensuring better communication

32. The Teachers Unions, Principals Organisations and School Management Bodies contend that principals, teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) need to be more directly involved in the decision-making process.
33. Submissions express concerns that guidance from the Department can be late and, at times, this guidance is released to the media before school management. The Gaeloideachas submission notes that their schools are impacted further in this regard, because of the delay in Irish version guidance to all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools. The Committee considers that all communications need to issue from one source and be available simultaneously in Irish and English.
34. The submissions express concern that there is an absence of clear direction from the HSE and different interpretations and responses by different HSE regions to public health guidelines, is causing additional stress and anxiety among school principals.
35. The National Parents Councils Primary and Post Primary and the Irish Secondary Schools Union (ISSU) articulated in oral evidence that communication and clarity are key requirements for school management and the wider school community.
36. The Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) submission stated that Template Communications to be made available to schools to assist with Covid-19 related queries.

### Recommendation:

4. The Department of Education should establish a Covid Communications Unit and send all communications directly to School Principals bilingually and afterwards respond to media queries.

## Adequacy of school facilities

37. Many submissions highlight a lack of space or small classroom size as being a major difficulty in implementing the Guidelines. This is compounded for schools in temporary accommodation and for small schools.
38. The Submissions contend that the lack of space or classroom size is impacting on the ability to apply social distancing, causing significant levels of anxiety among school leaders and staff for their own safety and that of their students.
39. The ASTI submission states that 25% of schools surveyed did not have warm water in the school toilet facilities. The National Parents Forum (NPF) submission states that 25% of schools reported not having a suitable space for a Covid-19 isolation area.
40. The Gaeloideachas submission, notes that many Gaeltacht schools, and many all-Irish schools in remote areas, have staff shortages impacting on their ability to cope with the intensive response planning.
41. The 3 Teachers Unions and FÓRSA, in their submissions and oral evidence, raise the issue of ventilation and the need to install monitoring systems in all classrooms urgently.

## Recommendations:

5. The Department of Education should publish a Circular providing clear guidelines for situations where a school cannot implement physical distancing according to the Guidelines,
6. Air Monitors/Meters should be installed in all primary and post primary schools by end December 2021.

## Supports for special needs provision

42. The NPF submission notes that over half (53.6%) of Principals surveyed observed an increase in Special Educational Needs (SEN) since returning to school. The NPF submission further notes that this increase could be caused by the loss of engagement, skills, learning and human connection regarding students with SEN during the March to May period.
43. A number of submissions outlined the conditions in which staff in special schools continue to work in environments where public health advice cannot be followed. Students in special education are also particularly vulnerable. The National Association of Management Boards for Secondary Education (NAMBSE) Submission asserts that SNE students and staff often cannot maintain social distancing. The Submission also contends that most special needs students cannot wear masks or face coverings.
44. The FÓRSA submission notes that the Department of Education informed schools that the purchase and use of basic surgical grade face masks, offering protection against Covid-19 for Special Needs Assistant (SNA)s, was optional and not mandatory. It explains that the HSE designates students as close contacts but not SNAs on the basis that SNAs can maintain social distancing or are provided with PPE. However, this may not be the case.
45. Another key concern raised in submissions and oral evidence regards the increased funding needed for PPE and cleaning of special classes and special schools. Submissions note that many schools have already spent their cleaning grant and some schools, especially those in older buildings with higher cleaning costs, will need access to top-up grants.
46. The AsIAm, Down Syndrome Ireland and Inclusion Ireland Report highlighted the difficulty many students with additional needs faced reintegrating when schools reopened. This was even more difficult for students transitioning to a new education setting, such as primary to post primary, with 33% of such students reporting that they received no support. Covid-19 safety measures have also caused particular challenges to the coping mechanisms of many students with additional needs. For example, a strict adherence to minimising bringing items from home into class could be interpreted as prohibiting individual sensory tools, the lack of which will only exacerbate stress levels.
47. Several submissions raised concerns regarding the requirement that Special Education Teachers are being used to provide substitute cover. This problem may be exacerbated in developing schools where the front-loaded allocation model and other factors leave these schools with insufficient Special Education Teachers and SNAs to meet basic needs.

## Recommendations:

7. The Department of Education should provide medical grade PPE for all staff in Special Education Settings, who cannot socially distance.
8. The Department of Education should identify the additional resources needed and publish a Special Educational Needs (SEN) Implementation Plan, in consultation with the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS), National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and TUSLA Educational Support Services (TUSLA), by end May 2021.

## At risk students and staff

48. There are teachers and students who are vulnerable and more at risk of contracting Covid-19. In cases of vulnerable children, the Department of Education's submission acknowledges that some students and parents may be anxious about returning to classrooms and that some parents may make a conscious choice to home school their children.
49. Concerns were raised that teachers from within the school's teaching resources may have to provide online teaching to children at home, in addition to their normal teaching duties.
50. The Irish Secondary Schools Union (ISSU) submission indicates that there is stress and anxiety amongst the student population, especially vulnerable students, or students who live with vulnerable people and feel unsafe attending school. The ISSU proposes that a comprehensive review of the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) guidance for vulnerable students and families must take place promptly to reflect current public health advice.
51. The ASTI submission states that many at-risk teachers have to attend school and no remote or reasonable accommodations have been implemented to allow them to participate in their work or studies in a more appropriate setting. The TUI submission states that many of these teachers have serious illnesses, such as heart disease or significant immunity issues and a review (of the risk assessment and attendant categorisation) for these teachers is necessary.

## Recommendations:

9. The Minister for Education should formally request the Minister for Health to instruct the HSE to undertake a review of the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) guidance for vulnerable students and families, including a review of the risk assessment and attendant categorisation.
10. The Department of Education should issue a circular with clear guidelines on how high-risk teachers can work remotely and how schools should support children who are at very high risk of contracting Covid-19 and self-isolating.

## Online and blended learning

52. Several submissions refer to inconsistency in digital skills impacting on the delivery of online learning. There is a risk to a specific cohort of students who may be left further behind because they do not have devices in the home or the skills to engage in online teaching. [
53. Lower levels of engagement amongst students from DEIS settings are also reported, associated with lack of interest, lack of support in the home and a lack of access to technology. This is particularly the case in disadvantaged communities and in schools supporting large numbers of Traveller and Roma pupils.
54. Submissions highlight that a school's capacity to provide online teaching is impacted if broadband is not accessible easily.
55. In terms of home schooling, the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) submission refers to the issue of parents having difficulties as home tutors.
56. Submissions emphasised the need for formal and explicit requirements from the Department of Education for all teachers so that online learning is standardised across the country. The ISSU oral evidence explicitly asks for a National Online Learning Plan and in a further Submission advises that a Transition Plan is also required as the Plan is rolled out to all schools. **It is imperative the Department of Education assumes absolute responsibility for standardisation and ensures compliance through a consistent monitoring regime.**

### Recommendations:

11. The Department of Education should develop A National Online Learning Programme, to be rolled out to all primary and secondary schools, as a matter of urgent priority, to include:
  - One centralised Learning Platform;
  - Appropriate support and training for all principals and teachers and parents who are home schooling;
  - Remote device purchase that ensures disadvantaged students have access to devices for online learning;
  - Adequate broadband for online learning;
  - Provisions for Blended Learning, and
  - Transition Measures for Schools as the Plan is rolled out.
12. A mandatory Module on Digital Learning should be provided in all initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses, commencing in 2021. Mandatory training on Digital Learning should be made available to all Principals, Deputy and Assistant Principals, and Teachers as part of their Continuous Professional Development with the option to progress to a Post Graduate Diploma or Degree.

## Teaching Resources

57. A key issue that seems to have impacted on the implementation of Response plans was a lack of time and resources. Submissions propose that designated planning time be introduced within the school calendar year, with substitute cover or school closure days.

58. Submissions express serious concerns about teacher supply and the need to ensure that all schools, including special schools, have access to a teacher supply panel to cover teacher absences.
59. The Trinity College Dublin (TCD) Submission refers to the impact on future teacher supply because of concerns regarding the graduation of students from Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. School Placement was significantly impacted by the closure of schools in March 2020 and the consequent support to and evaluation of ITE students was seriously curtailed.
60. Submissions welcome the supports and resources provided by the Department and other agencies to support the well-being of students returning to school in a Covid-19 environment.

#### **Recommendations:**

13. The Department of Education should issue a circular with clarifications on Teacher Supply Panels and Designated Planning Days for school staff on Covid-19 related issues.
14. The Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Institutions should ensure that ITE students undergo the requisite teaching practice, to include supports and evaluation, prior to graduation, as a key priority.

### **School transport**

61. The Committee notes the significant work undertaken by the Department of Education, in conjunction with Bus Éireann, to put in place measures to support infection prevention and control on school buses. The Department of Education's submission notes that measures include all post-primary students wearing masks, all bus drivers and bus escorts receiving PPE where necessary, as well as funding to support additional cleaning and hygiene measures, including the provision of sanitiser on all buses. Seating plans with pre-assigned seating are in place on all routes, with children sitting next to their siblings or classmates where possible.
62. Submissions report a greater risk of infection on school transport. The HSE agree that school bus travel is an area where the public health recommendations need to be re-enforced to protect and align with the hard work being undertaken within the school setting.
63. A key issue highlighted in submissions is the vulnerability of SEN students as social distancing may not be always possible on school transport due to lack of space and because many SEN students cannot wear face coverings. It is noted that SEN students spend longer hours on school transport which is impacting on their vulnerability further.
64. Submissions also raise concerns that primary students on school transport do not need to wear masks.
65. Another key issue that is highlighted by submissions is the widespread disruption caused by parents dropping children to school and delays at Garda checkpoints., Submissions propose the provision of car stickers (similar to that in use for healthcare workers) for school staff to reduce delays at checkpoints.

66. It is noted in submissions that when schools report a Covid-19 case to the HSE they are not being asked whether the pupil(s) concerned availed of school transport.
67. Submissions propose that safety measures are reviewed, and revised guidance is issued to parents and children on the operation of school transport, with due regard to SEN students.

**Recommendations:**

15. The Department of Education, in liaison with Bus Éireann, should publish revised safety measures around school transport with due regard to SEN students, by end March 2021.
16. The Department of Education should ensure that all bus drivers and bus escorts receive the requisite PPE.

### Reporting a Covid-19 case

68. Submissions highlight that to date there is dissatisfaction with the level of information being shared between schools and the HSE in both a specific incidence where a case of Covid-19 is confirmed and more generally regarding contact tracing in a locality.
69. Submissions also highlighted the need for the designation of close contacts within schools to be addressed because of the perception of the different assessment process to determine close or casual contacts in the community and in schools. This has led to a widespread belief amongst school staff that cases occurring in the community are dealt with to a higher clinical standard than cases which occur in schools.
70. Submissions note that where there is a confirmed case of Covid-19 in a school, school leaders have requested that testing of entire classes be done as standard because students share facilities for the school day.
71. The Department of Education's submission notes that the definition of close contacts within a school will be variable and determined by a risk assessment that will take account of individual factors within each school or class. It will not be automatically assumed that a whole class will be deemed as close contacts. There is no blanket policy to test entire classes or years and Public Health will determine between a range of possible interventions, from exclusion and testing of a small group or pod of pupils up to and including closure of an affected facility.
72. Submissions contend that because the rationale for the testing decision-making process is not shared with school staff and parents, schools may have to close in attempting to reduce the risk of transmission. As there is no formal process for notifying the Department of school closures], the Department will have no formal process to know that schools have closed.
73. Submissions express concerns that published HSE data on cases arising within schools is not broken down to identify how many students or staff have tested positive.
74. The ASTI Submission highlights the importance of designating Covid-19 as a reportable disease under health and safety regulations and that more Health and Safety inspectors are needed to ensure enforcement and compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol.

**Recommendation:**

17. The Minister for Education should formally request the Minister for Health to put in place a National School Testing and Tracing Programme by end June 2021.

**Contingency plans for school closures**

75. The Programme for Government notes that detailed contingency plans will be prepared for further potential school closures, while also investing in teacher CPD to support distance and blended learning.
76. Submissions propose that contingency should be undertaken in consultation with the relevant stakeholders, including Heads of Schools, and include a blended learning approach with staggered school attendance in line with a school's capacity to implement social distancing in small classrooms with large class sizes.
77. Submissions note that the Guidelines specify that keeping schools open is contingent on recommendations based on situation and evidence at the time. Clarification is needed on whether this will be on an individual school basis or for all schools collectively.
78. Submissions welcome that the Department of Education Inspectorate are adopting a supportive role to schools currently and setting aside their quality assurance role for this school year. The Committee opines that further clarification on the Inspectorate role in the Covid-19 environment is needed.
79. Submissions highlight that children with special educational needs have been adversely affected by the closure of the schools and will be further adversely affected by future closures.
80. The HSE Submission notes that in terms of school's closures because of infection levels very few schools (less than 5) have been closed at the request of public health following a Public Health Risk Assessment (PHRA). HSE further note that very few schools have chosen to close because of core staffing issues pertaining to close contacts needing to isolate and very few schools have chosen specific year groups to transfer to online platforms for a day or so whilst the PHRA has been undertaken.
81. However, the Committee are concerned to hear of a case that was highlighted in submissions 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.
82. In this regard, the Committee are concerned that delays in responding to cases or outbreaks of Covid-19 in schools are overcome to enable better contingency planning for school closures and that contingency plans are developed immediately.
83. The ISSU submission and oral evidence expresses concerns that the Inspectorate only measure compliance rates and not the impact of compliance measures

**Recommendation:**

18. The Department of Education Inspectorate should take the lead role in determining the impact of the compliance measures and report on this by end June 2021.



## **Module 2: Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and Leaving Certificate 2021 Preparations**

### **Witnesses**

84. On the 10 November the Committee met with Officials from the Department for a briefing on the 2020 Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades and, specifically, (a) The Calculated Grades Process;(b) Measures that are in place to review the Process and to indemnify students who were wrongly graded; and (c) Preparations for 2021 Leaving Certificate.

The debate can be accessed [here](#).

85. Also, at the meeting on 17 November when the Committee met with Ms. Norma Foley TD Minister for Education to discuss the Minister’s key priorities, the 2020 Leaving Certificate (LC) Calculated Grades and 2021 LC Preparations were discussed.

The debate can be accessed [here](#).

86. Some Module 1 submissions on Ensuring schools stay open in a Safe and Sustainable Way referred to the Leaving Certificate and preparations for 2021 Leaving Certificate. Key points made are contained in this module.

87. The postponed 2020 Leaving Certificate, including the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Applied, written examinations will commence on 16 November 2020 and will take place over a 4-week period to 11 December 2020.

### **Introduction**

88. The postponed 2020 Leaving Certificate, including the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Applied, written examinations will commence on 16 November 2020 and will take place over a 4-week period to 11 December 2020.

89. The Inspectorate provided in early September a subject by subject guide which outlined changes in widening assessment options for the Leaving Certificate, Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied in 2021. Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) submission requests additional flexibility in assessment and exam question choice.

### **Preparations for 2021 Leaving Certificate**

90. The Department of Education submission notes that in August 2020, a series of changes to the assessment arrangements for both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021 were announced. There will be additional choices in examinations, while still maintaining the overall structure of each examination. The overarching aim of the changes is to increase choice for students and offer them flexibility in the examination, while preserving the overall structure and feel of the examinations, so students may still use previous year’s examination papers as reference points as part of their preparation. The Department of Education submission notes that in August 2020, a series of changes to the assessment arrangements for both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021 were announced. There will be additional choices in examinations, while still maintaining the overall structure of each examination. The overarching aim of the changes is to increase choice for students and offer them flexibility in the examination, while

preserving the overall structure and feel of the examinations, so students may still use previous year's examination papers as reference points as part of their preparation.

91. The Department of Education submission notes that in August 2020, a series of changes to the assessment arrangements for both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021 were announced. There will be additional choices in examinations, while still maintaining the overall structure of each examination. The overarching aim of the changes is to increase choice for students and offer them flexibility in the examination, while preserving the overall structure and feel of the examinations, so students may still use previous year's examination papers as reference points as part of their preparation.
92. The Department's Submission highlights that the changes are designed to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the 2019/20 school year and to factor in for some further possible loss of learning time in the 2020/21 school year as a contingency measure. Some further minor adjustments will be made in respect of some subjects.
93. The NAPD Submission states that teachers and students need timely clarity and regarding changes to assessment and additional choices available.
94. On 10 December, SOLAS gave oral evidence, proposing that there are more vocational options available at Senior Cycle and in the Transition Year Programme.

#### **Recommendations:**

19. The Department of Education should ensure due account is taken of lost learning time in 2021 Contingency Plans.
20. The Department of Education should expedite the Independent Review of the Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades Model, with a view to its completion and publication by end March 2021.
21. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report should be published by end June 2021 with due regard to the need for continuous assessment, increased vocational options and international best practice.

## **Module 3: Other issues**

### **Witnesses**

95. On 15 October 2020, the Committee met officials from the Department of Education and Skills to discuss the publication of the Department's guidelines on the use of reduced timetables in schools.

The debate can be accessed [here](#).

96. On 5 November 2020, the Committee met with staff from the National Anti-Bullying Resource and Research Centre (ABC), Dublin City University to discuss cyberbullying and internet security during Covid-19.

The debate can be accessed [here](#).

97. On 17 December 2020 the Committee met with representatives from the Educational Disadvantage Centre (EDC), Dublin City University to discuss educational disadvantage and staff and students from the Cork Life Centre to discuss alternative education settings for Early School Leavers.

The debate can be accessed [here](#).

## Introduction

98. The Committee examined key issues facing the Irish school community; The use of reduced timetables, bullying, and educational disadvantage.

## Use of Reduced Timetables in Schools

99. The Department of Education and Skills announced in September 2019 that proposed guidelines on the use of reduced hours timetables would be published, underpinned by the principles that a reduced timetable should not be used as a sanction or as a behavioural management tool. The consultation process for these guidelines ended on 18 October 2019, and to date, the guidelines have not been published. The Department of Education informed the Committee that the priority focus in recent months has been on schools reopening and providing supports for children within schools, and it is intended to issue the guidelines to schools as soon as possible.

### Recommendation:

22. The Department of Education should publish the Final Guidelines on the Use of Reduced Timetables in Schools, by end March 2021.

## School Bullying and Cyber Bullying during Covid-19

100. The increased use of online learning and communication methods for students during the Covid-19 pandemic has led to concerns about a growth in cyberbullying. Although cyberbullying incidents often occur outside school grounds, the consequences impact adversely within the school environment. According to the DCU National Anti Bullying Centre (ABC), more support and training for principals and school staff would help overcome the challenges in implementing anti-bullying procedures.
101. The Committee also heard that the 2013 Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools had been successful in that every school now has an awareness of bullying as an issue, and an anti-bullying policy. However, ABC recommended that these guidelines should be updated to include guidelines on how to deal with homophobia and transphobia, and to highlight programmes available to support schools.

## Recommendations:

23. The Department of Education should introduce a mandatory online Cyber Bullying Training Programme for all primary and secondary school teachers.
24. The Department of Education should update the 2013 Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools to include guidelines for addressing homophobia and transphobia.

## Educational Disadvantage

102. The Committee was informed of key supports that could be made available to vulnerable and disadvantaged students.
103. Trauma and mood disorders such as depression have been identified as being significant factors leading to early school leaving. Ireland does not provide in school emotional counselling and therapeutic supports, which leaves it out of step with many other European countries. The Committee heard from the Director of the DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre (EDC) that this is not addressed by either NEPS (National Educational Psychology Service) or Guidance Counsellors in schools. School Guidance Counsellors are not qualified or mandated to provide ongoing individual therapeutic supports for trauma and complex emotional needs.
104. The Committee heard that Ireland has been very successful in the past decade in reducing early school leaving, and that a large part of the credit for this can go to the success of the DEIS school system. EDC warned the Committee that the implementation of a proposed new assessment method for DEIS status should not risk this progress by removing resources from improving DEIS schools and giving them to new DEIS schools.
105. Hot meals provision in schools has been expanded from the initial 7000 children to 35,000 more in 2020. The commitment in the Programme for Government to 'Work across government to address food poverty in children and ensure no child goes hungry', if applied to rolling out hot meals to all schools nationally, could have a transformative effect on students' lives. The submission from the EDC also appealed for hot meal provision to be extended to cover periods of school closure, which would be particularly relevant if Covid-19 forced schools to close again.
106. There are policy gaps in Ireland regarding the provision of afterschool arts services and participatory outdoor learning for marginalised students. EDC, in their submission, informed the committee that differences exist regarding access to the arts, levels of engagement with cultural activities and socioeconomic status. Additionally, use of local outdoor spaces can help support children to develop as engaged citizens.
107. The Committee heard from the Cork Life Centre (CLC) regarding their difficulties in securing sustainable funding. The Department of Education has no clear definition for alternative education, and this lack of recognition means that institutions such as the CLC, which offer education and support to vulnerable early school leavers outside of the mainstream education system, have no route to secure long-term funding. This causes serious problems such as an inability to retain key staff.

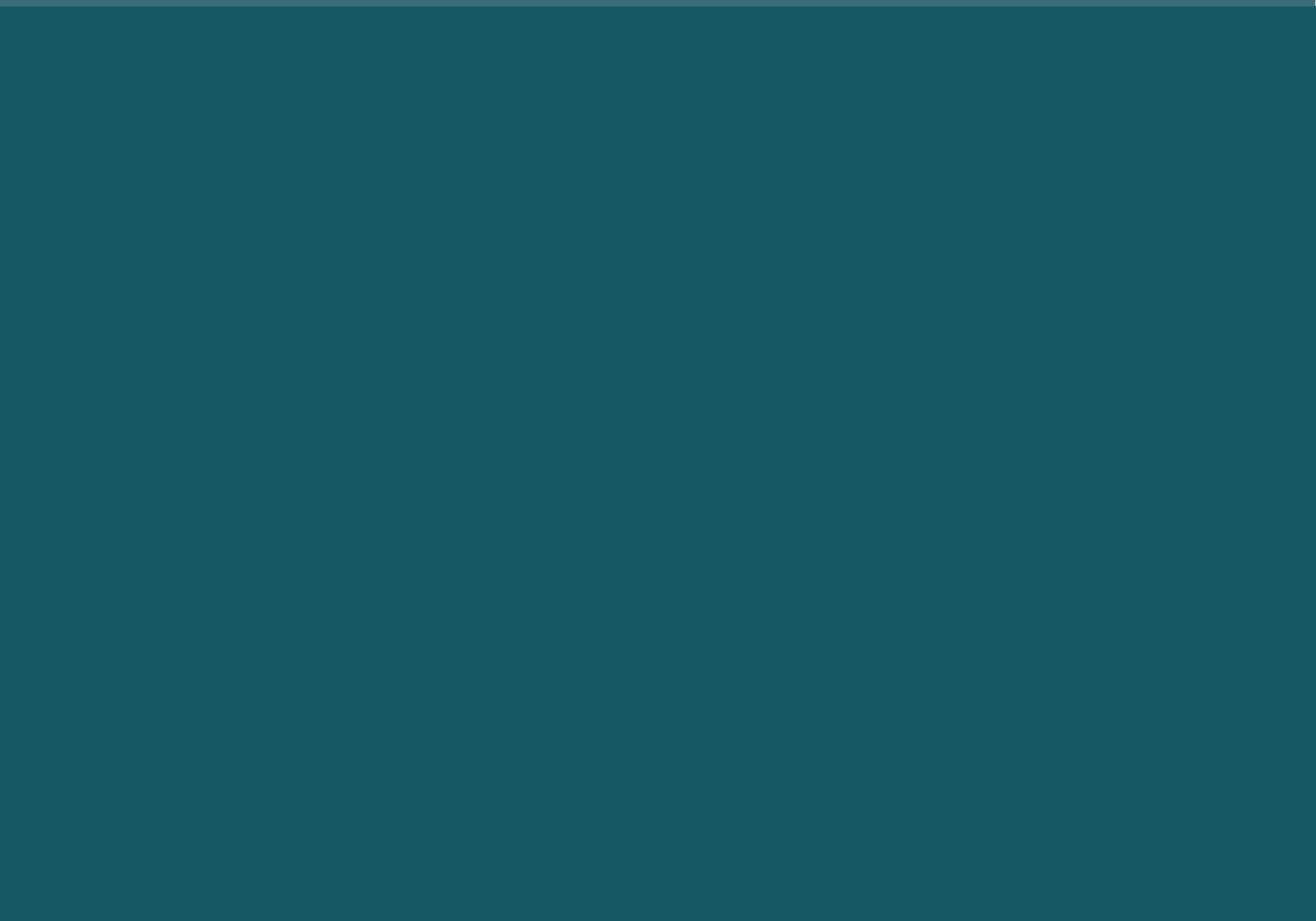
**Recommendations:**

25. Emotional counselling and therapeutic supports should be provided in all primary and secondary schools as an urgent priority.
26. Any change to the method of designating DEIS status should ensure that the addition of new DEIS schools does not lead to the removal of status or resources from improving DEIS schools.
27. The provision of hot meals to vulnerable students should be expanded to cover periods of school closures and holidays and a Hot Meals Programme should be rolled out nationally to all schools on a phased basis.

## Appendix 1: List of Submissions

Submissions were received from the following organisations:

- Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI)
- Bus Eireann
- Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA)
- Catholic Secondary Schools Parents Association (CSSPA)
- City of Dublin Education and Training Board (ETB)
- Cork Life Centre
- Department of Education
- Educate Together
- Education and Training Board Ireland
- Educational Disadvantage Centre, DCU
- Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
- FÓRSA
- Gaelscoileanna Teo
- General Synod Board of Education
- Health and Safety Authority
- Health Service Executive (HSE)
- Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)
- Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN)
- Irish Second–Level Students' Union (ISSU)
- Irish Universities Association (IUA)
- Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS)
- National Association of Boards of Management for Special Education (NABMSE)
- National Anti-Bullying Resource and Research Centre, Dublin City University (DCU)
- National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)
- National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP)
- National Parents Council Primary (NPC)
- National Principal Forum (NPF)
- School of Education, National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG)
- School of Education, Trinity College Dublin
- School of Education, University College Cork
- School of Education, University of Limerick
- SOLAS
- Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI)
- Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)
- Trinity College Dublin
- University of Limerick
- University College Cork (UCC)
- World Health Organisation



## Houses of the Oireachtas

Leinster House

Kildare Street

Dublin 2

D02 XR20

[www.oireachtas.ie](http://www.oireachtas.ie)

Tel: +353 (0)1 6183000 or 076 1001700

Twitter: @OireachtasNews

## Connect with us



## Download our App

