



**Fórsa Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on “Ensuring that Schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable” 19<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

1. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee this morning. Given the necessary time constraints I will focus these opening remarks on the need to review the Department of Education’s guidance on the provision of Personal Protective Equipment to Schools staff.
2. We remain concerned at the lack of clarity regarding the provision of PPE to Schools staff and specifically to Special Needs Assistants and Bus Escorts who cannot maintain the recommended 2m social distance.
3. The Department of Education informed Schools in their Roadmap that the purchase and use of basic surgical grade face masks was optional, not compulsory. In September 2020 Fórsa conducted a survey which received over 4,000 responses from SNAs indicating that approximately one third of respondents had not been provided with face masks and had been provided only with face coverings which offer minimal protection against contracting the virus.
4. Fórsa requested advice on infection control issues for SNAs, after a considerable delay the HPSC published advice in September which stated that face masks should be provided to SNAs where they could not maintain social distancing ‘and where they were required to carry out intimate care for students’. This has led to a ridiculous situation whereby an SNA works side by side with a student for over 6 hours but may then only receive the protection of a basic grade mask when taking the student to the toilet.
5. The risks of not maintaining a 2m social distance do not solely occur when providing personal care to the student as the risks are present when the SNA helps with learning activities, it is the lack of distance that creates the risk not washing and changing a student.

6. The lack of adequate PPE has implications for staff assessed as being at high risk should they contract Covid-19. These staff have been advised to attend work with the risks to their health being offset by the use of PPE. This is clearly contradicted by the HPSC advice that face masks may only be necessary when providing personal care to students.
7. It cannot be right that an employee working as a Bus Escort with 20 students in a confined space for several hours is not provided with a basic grade mask, it is simply illogical to state that an SNA working side by side with students throughout the day only needs a surgical grade mask when taking a student to the toilet or when helping them to wash and change clothes.
8. Fórsa has this week started to provide a stock of surgical masks to SNAs who cannot access this equipment within their school. We were able to purchase a stock of these masks at a cost of 20c each. The Department of Education's procurement framework enables schools to bulk buy at much lower costs.
9. In summary we believe that the Department of Education started planning for the re-opening of schools with a perspective aimed at minimising the use of PPE in schools and has continued to maintain such a policy to the detriment of the staff who have been asked to keep these workplaces open during Level 5 public health restrictions.
10. Schools staff deserve to have adequate PPE provided as do their colleagues in health and social care services. The advice on the use of PPE should be urgently reviewed to ensure that equipment is provided to those in our schools who are at high risk and to those who are working every day without being able to maintain the recommended 2m social distance.

**Andy Pike**  
**National Secretary**  
**Fórsa Trade Union**