

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

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

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Introduction

The reopening of schools after the prolonged closure from March until August 2020 was a mammoth task. Enormous efforts by school managements, staff and students were made to seek to ensure that the reopening was a success. The challenge now is to ensure, in a context that has seen a deterioration in the containment of Covid-19 in wider society that schools remain Covid-19 secure and that school communities are safe. With the right supports, schools can meet this challenge.

Ensuring the health and safety of students, teachers and other school personnel

The duty of care of school Boards of Management to their students and staff has never been more acute. Each Board has conducted an extensive COVID-19 risk assessment of the physical infrastructure of the school and are committed to implementing and monitoring their COVID-19 response. Notwithstanding these important governance measures, differential capacity of schools to implement key aspects of the COVID-19 response plan is a fact. Hygiene and ventilation facilities still need to be upgraded; cleaning routines reviewed and enhanced. The availability and suitability of PPE for all staff and students also needs to be reviewed.

ASTI has called for intensive daily monitoring of the progression of the virus in schools and that there be a rapid response to any deterioration of the situation in individual schools or across the network. Prioritising schools for rapid testing and tracing is absolutely necessary if we are to keep schools safe, keep schools open and reduce the stress levels of teachers.

Monitoring compliance and ensuring accountability

ASTI is anxious that the Inspection model that is currently being piloted by the Department of Education, in conjunction with the Health and Safety Authority will be rolled out nationally without further delay.

Vulnerable teachers and students

In every school there are teachers and students who are vulnerable in terms of their health status or particular personal circumstances, including pregnancy. The ASTI is dismayed that many of these members have been required to attend schools and no remote or reasonable accommodations have been implemented to allow them to participate in their work or studies in a more appropriate setting.

ASTI members' concerns

ASTI members recently voted to take industrial action unless the Government immediately addresses key Covid-19 issues in schools. These include rapid testing and turnaround, appropriate resources for schools to ensure continuation of learning where there are school closures/ self-isolation, a redefinition of close contacts for school settings and appropriate arrangements for teachers categorised as 'high risk'. ASTI members are clearly stating that they want schools to remain open for students during this pandemic.

On unequal pay, ASTI members voted to take industrial action for equal pay for equal work, to be taken in conjunction with one or both of the other teacher unions. ASTI members remain absolutely committed to achieving equal pay for teachers who entered the profession from 2010. We will not stop until this abhorrent inequity is removed. ASTI notes that a 'close contact' in Irish schools appears not to conform to the definition being implemented elsewhere. ASTI has called for a broadening of the definition in use to one which would be more consistent with other workplaces.

We have also called for the free provision of laptops for students and teachers to ensure that learning can continue as much as possible if classes are required to self-isolate, or schools are required to close due to Covid-19.

ASTI members are also reporting that a lack of communication protocols in schools where an outbreak has occurred has been a major issue since reopening. It is necessary that schools are guided on how to communicate in these circumstances and in a manner that addresses and alleviates concerns.

COVID-19 is an occupational health problem

The ASTI is heartened by the recommendation issued by the COVID-19 Oireachtas Committee that the disease be designated be a reportable disease under health and safety regulations and for more inspectors for the HSA to ensure enforcement and compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol. This decision is consonant with the view of the ICTU that if a worker acquires an illness in the workplace, it must be reportable to the HSA, and must be examined by the HSA to identify how the injury/ illness was acquired and how future injury/infections can be prevented. We urge this Committee to follow the lead of its colleagues in the COVID-19 Committee.

Conclusion

Teachers are essential workers in the education system. It is essential that schools are safe spaces for teachers and students: health, safety and welfare must be the priority of school management and the Department of Education and Skills. Teacher workload and focusing on their wellbeing underpin the overall policy in ensuring that schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable.