



**NATIONAL PARENTS COUNCIL
Post Primary**

COMHAIRLE NAISIUNTA TUISMITHEOIRI
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NPCPP Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science 26th November 2020.

The National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP) is grateful to the Joint Committee for the opportunity to make these submissions on behalf of parents of students attending post-primary schools in Ireland and their children.

The mental and physical wellbeing of our children has always been, and remains, the main focus of concern for parents.

We re-emphasise the importance of fairness, equality and equity in the delivery of the support for children and their families during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This must continue to be central to considerations and implementation of plans.

NPCPP are very grateful to all of those in our school communities who have worked so hard to have our schools re-open on time and who continue their committed efforts to ensure that our children can attend school in as normal a way as possible within a safe and caring environment.

It is clear that most students and their parents prefer schools to be open and routines as close to 'normal' as are safely possible to be in place but, naturally, there are many concerns surrounding keeping our children and families safe in the midst of this pandemic and communications we receive from parents, together with trends clear from our 'Back at School' survey, demonstrate that the anxiety felt as schools re-opened has not abated.

Trends in our current survey of parents show that when schools originally re-opened almost 50% of returning students reported anxiety and, as of now, 60% of 5,000 respondents report that the anxiety then felt has not abated whatsoever and that for 20% their level of anxiety has actually increased.

Fear of the spread of infection within schools and the risk of bringing the disease home remain a significant concern amongst parents and students. There remains some confusion about the difference between a 'close contact' in schools and that outside. This is exacerbated when parents consider the use of public transport and also school buses where they apparently operate at 100% capacity. Almost 20% of parents in the survey indicate their use of an alternative form of transport to school to previous years in an effort to mitigate these factors.

Directors: M. Fanning **President**, M. O'Shea **Chair of Finance**, P. Rolston **Communications Director**,
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National Parents Council Post Primary CLG (Company Limited by Guarantee).

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There is also concern that parents are not being fully informed when an incidence of COVID-19 occurs in their school. NPCPP has always advocated for **clear communications** between all involved. This is essential as ‘vacuums’ tend to create suspicion and misinformation which can considerably increase the level of anxiety amongst the school community.

This also links to very serious concern at the poor level of support where a student has to withdraw from school due to a COVID-19 incident. Of respondents to our survey who indicated that their child has had to withdraw from school for a period due to COVID-19 23% indicated that they found no supports at all in place while a further 30% have indicated that the supports offered were lacking - being not good or poor.

The classroom time lost during shutdown for all students is also a major concern. Parents with students in State exam years are particularly worried about their children not being able to catch up with 30% expressing real difficulty in recovering following close down. 60% of these parents indicate that they are less than satisfied with the support currently in place of which 18% indicated they were not at all satisfied.

There are major concerns around the inability of teachers and students to cover the full curriculum have been expressed. There is a definite need for some compensatory measures to be taken in the Summer 2021 state exams to acknowledge this problem. These and other measures being taken to ensure minimal disruption to the 2021 exams need to be decided upon and communicated clearly, as soon as possible, to parents and students to reassure them.

It is acknowledged and emphasised that live interaction in the classroom creates a learning experience not available remotely. The ability to undertake some practical work aids the learning process. Real classroom time and in person teaching results in better academic and intellectual stimulation and engagement for most students.

This, along with interaction with their peers in the school environment is critical at this point in our students’ development.

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While there is clear and understandable concern around some of the risks attached to attending school, there is no doubt that the vast majority of parents are happy to have their children back at school and their children are happier in school than trying to learn and study remotely. While anxiety remains, having familiar routines at school times is broadly welcomed.

88% of respondents indicate that they are happy with the sanitization regime at their school but some of the implemented strategies are causing problems.

The wearing of face-masks all day, particularly when there is no opportunity to periodically remove them or if there is restricted access to the open air during breaktimes, is causing problems, anxiety and also difficulty in social terms, where students cannot, at all, see the facial expressions of their peers or the teachers.

Another area of serious concern is the weight of school bags which children have to carry. This is an ongoing problem, regularly highlighted by NPCPP, but is particularly problematic now given the restricted access to lockers in school. 75% of parents responding to our survey indicate that their child has no access to a school locker. Where carrying a heavy bag to and from school has been a serious problem in the past, students now have to carry this weight around the school during the day also. This will lead to some serious physical and development issues and the number of books a student needs to carry around must be addressed.

Access to fresh air and time for exercise has always been indicated as necessary to assist with wellbeing, the ability to concentrate and student engagement in class.

Ventilation is also a priority within the classroom to prevent the spread of the virus, but where open windows in a classroom result in the loss of heat from a room and students feeling cold there must be allowance made by school for students to wrap up and wear additional clothing to compensate for the drop in temperature in the classroom. 62% of respondents to our Parent survey indicated that their children had complained of feeling cold in their classroom. 26% of respondents stated that their school did not allow additional clothing. That cannot be allowed to continue as our weather further disimproves and average daytime temperatures drop further. Reasonable accommodation for additional clothing must be made by all schools.

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NPCPP welcomes recent announcements about the forthcoming availability of vaccines and look forward, as everyone does, to seeing the end of COVID-19 but we are very aware that many issues have arisen for students and parents during 2020 which will have longer term effects.

Addressing the ongoing issues relating to student mental health and well-being and around preparations for and the holding of 2021 examinations still need to be considered and addressed.

The difficulties for students new to schools where they cannot fully interact, socialize and get to know their peers in school, the restriction and loss of normal activities in Transition Year and the general affect that COVID-19 restrictions have had on normal school life will remain with our students for some time to come. We must all be cognizant of these issues and supportive of our students and all in our school communities for some time to come until we fully recover from the difficulties this virus has brought to education and our lives generally.

Again NPCPP emphasise that the mantra “We are all in this together” is only as good as the weakest link in the chain and it is through mutual support and clear and timely communications between State, School and Home that we will effectively manage to achieve reasonable normality again in our school communities.

Parents and their children, along with all in the school communities, have not been found wanting in facing the difficulties brought upon us by this pandemic. That will continue and NPCPP commit to standing behind all in our efforts to assist and support parents, students and our partners in education through the ongoing difficulties and the times ahead.

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