

Mr. Reuben Murray, President, Irish Second-level Student's Union

Opening Statement

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

26th November 2020

Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Reuban Murray and I am the president of the Irish Second-level Student's Union.

Are schools open in a safe and sustainable way? The answer to this question will vary from school to school but we at the ISSU have found emerging trends that highlight issues that we must address. These can be found in our submission to the committee and I feel it is important that in my opening statement I focus on the following key points.

One such issue (and possibly the most impacting) is the unrelenting and constant overassessment of students. Exam years are currently now finding themselves sitting monthly or even weekly exams (with schools citing preparing for calculated grades as the reason). These tests (once a way to help students learn) now take on a whole new level of pressure and stress as students now believe that these class tests may decide their exam results if the state exams cannot go ahead. This is putting unnecessary and unsustainable amounts of anxiety on students. If we do not remedy this it will result in widespread burnout across our schools.

But why is overassessment taking place? Because we have not provided enough clarity on the 2021 State Exams. There have been no concrete contingency plans communicated to schools. Simple questions remain unanswered e.g what will happen if a school has an outbreak during the Exams? We need to clearly communicate the contingency plans to schools as soon as we can and lift this fog of guesswork, assumptions and uncertainties.

Intrinsic to the contingency plans is online learning. Our schools and students are underprepared to make a transition to online learning. This is not just an issue that affects us in the event of national school closures, because every week students are instructed to self isolate for 14 days. We need a proper strategy now. At the moment students have been reporting inconsistent levels of support when self isolating. This ranges from students being cut off with no support to schools who make the effort and go the extra mile. We need to ensure everyone who is isolating to protect their peers does not fall behind and that they still receive an education. With the formation of a national online learning strategy we can effectively equip our schools to support all students.

I would like to advise the committee that the ISSU has conducted a survey of upwards of 9500 student members across Ireland in preparation for this meeting. A preliminary report will be sent to this committee as soon as possible. In answering your questions I will include any relevant statistics or insights from the survey where possible.

On a final note I would like to express that the ISSU is a solution focused organisation - when we present an issue we are always willing to work to find the solution. And it is in this spirit we wrote our submission and in

this same spirit i speak before you today. Partnership is what we need. And I wish to express our enthusiasm to work closely with this committee and its members in the future. I welcome any questions the committee has for me.