

## **Opening statement of Minister Madigan to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2021**

I wish to thank the Committee for the opportunity to update you on important measures to address the continuing the impact of Covid-19 on the education experience of children and young people.

Covid19 has impacted all parts of society, but we must remember that some groups have been impacted more than others.

Those in society who require additional supports or have particular needs have found the past two years to be more difficult than others.

Being the Minister for Special Education and Inclusion at this time has enabled me to bring a particular focus to the challenges faced by children with special needs and those at most risk of educational disadvantage.

I have a particular focus on inclusion in school. The issues being discussed today by the Committee are very relevant in this context particularly the work of Cork Life Centre which Minister Foley has addressed, the use of reduced schooldays by schools and school bullying both of which I will talk about later.

As members of this Committee are aware, the closure of schools for extended periods over the past two years, due to COVID restrictions, made accessing education much more difficult for this vulnerable group.

We have all heard how remote teaching and learning has been extremely difficult for many children and young people with disabilities.

The break with normal routines coupled with the absence of the customised teaching and care supports provided in the school environment deepened the impact of the Covid restrictions on this group of children and young people.

I know from my many encounters with parents, families, advocacy groups that this impact reaches into the families of these children and young people. Young people themselves also bear witness to this impact.

The loss of connection with education, school staff, and friends was a real concern for families and schools alike.

And notwithstanding the very significant investment of €2bn already being made in special education prior to the pandemic, additional measures were and continue to be required to support this group.

I will outline some of these measures developed and put in place by myself and Minister Foley over these past months which I believe are making positive difference on the lives of these children and young people most impacted by Covid-19.

Looking back, the Government was correct to prioritise special education in the reopening of schools earlier this year.

The Supplementary Programme which provided a much needed ongoing connection with education through the provision of in-home tuition or care during the period of school closure earlier this year. This was much appreciated by families

I am happy to report that over 14,000 of the most vulnerable pupils availed of this programme at a cost of over €10m.

Building on this theme of connection with education, an enhanced suite of summer programmes for children with special educational needs and children at most risk of education disadvantage during the vacation period. A fund of €40m has been provided for this purpose. The level of take up has been very good but we will know more in the coming weeks when all claims have been processed.

Under the new Covid Learning & Support programme (CLASS), every school can draw down additional teaching hours based on enrolment during the 2021/22 school year. These hours will be used to support those students who in the schools' opinion have been impacted most by the disrupted school experience of the last two years. Over €50m is being set aside for this programme.

At this point, I wish to acknowledge the work of schools, teachers and SNAs who have worked together with families and students through the pandemic period to ensure our schools could reopen on a safe and sustainable basis.

### **Other matters**

There are two other matters on which I would like to update the Committee, both of which impact on the inclusion of students in schools.

These are the use of reduced school days by schools and school bullying.

#### **a. Use of reduced school days**

I was pleased to announce last week the publication of guidelines on reduced school days.

The guidelines are intended to ensure reduced school days are used in a limited manner and only where absolutely necessary.

We have taken into account the experiences outlined by parents and advocacy groups, in various fora, including at the Joint Oireachtas Committee.

In addition we have also taken on board the views expressed by schools and education partners.

A fundamental principle is that the consent of parents is central to the process, prior to implementation of a reduced school day. The guidelines are also intended to ensure there is a consistency in approach. Where a reduced school day arrangement is put in place, it should be time-bound, and a plan to reintegrate the student to full day attendance should form part of the overall process.

We have also committed to ensure robust data collection on the use of reduced school days.

The guidelines will be applicable from 1 January 2022.

From that date, schools will be required to notify Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) when a reduced school day is being put in place.

In the interim schools are being asked to review arrangements currently in place and in particular to review the circumstances for any pupils currently on reduced school days. This will allow time for transition arrangements for pupils and schools.

## **b. School Bullying**

The Government is committed to improving the learning experience and success of learners.

In order to do this we must ensure that all learners are included and respected and feel part of their school community.

Schools are places where our children need to feel safe and supported and are enabled to reach their full potential.

We must foster a school culture based on respect and inclusion where bullying, when it does happen, will be acknowledged and addressed appropriately.

To do this, we need to consider bullying in a holistic manner and we need to take a whole school community approach.

The following measures that have been announced today clearly demonstrate my commitment and Minister Foley's commitment to taking such an approach.

The action plan on bullying and the anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools will be reviewed to take account of developments and relevant research since they were published in 2013.

From this school year, the Inspectorate will monitor and gather information about the implementation of anti-bullying measures in schools across all its inspection types.

The Charter Bill, which has already been passed in the Seanad, will continue its progress through the Dáil.

The introduction of a school community charter in schools will help foster a school culture based on respect and inclusion and will ensure that everyone's voice is heard.

A new online course for primary and post-primary teachers dedicated to addressing the topic of cyberbullying will be available from 2022.

The establishment of the Research Observatory on Cyberbullying, Cyberhate and Online Harassment at the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre in April 2021 will also help to provide schools with the support needed to prevent and tackle this very damaging form of bullying.

## **Conclusion**

I will continue to look at ways to address ongoing issues of concern for the inclusion of children and young people in education.

In the context of the upcoming budget, I will be seeking to increase the level of resources available for both teachers and SNAs so that our children and young people with additional needs continue to have the necessary supports to get an education which is their entitlement.

We now know that the in-school teaching and learning is the best way of supporting those children with special educational needs and those at greatest risk of disadvantage.

This will continue to be my priority.

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