

Opening Statement 21 September 2021 – Minister Foley

Cathaoirleach,

I am pleased to be here today before the Committee, as we begin a new Dail term, to discuss a number of important issues in the education sector.

We are joined by a number of Department officials today, including with me here in Kildare House Deirdre Shanley, Martina Mannion, Hubert Loftus, Yvonne Keating and Anne Tansey.

Introduction

The Committee, in its invitation, has set three important topics to discuss today, and I look forward to hearing the views of committee members on them.

Turning firstly to the safe and sustainable reopening of schools, I wish to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of all of the education partners working together with the Department of Education and with public health to ensure that our schools could remain operational throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

The safe return and sustained safe re-opening of our schools this month has been a key priority for me. We are all aware of the adverse consequences of school closures, which impacts on wellbeing, learning, and on children's social and emotional development.

In recent weeks, Government approved the implementation of a new Covid Learning and Supports Scheme, “CLASS” which will help mitigate the impact of Covid to students’ learning and wellbeing. This scheme offers additional targeted teaching hours to every primary and post-primary in the country supporting students’ learning and wellbeing in the coming school year. I have introduced this programme in order to further mitigate against the impacts of the loss of learning caused by school closures. This programme is in addition to the supplementary programme in Spring 2021 and the significantly expanded summer programme which catered for up to 33,000 students. Overall, more than €100 million has been spent on these measures, in addition to the €639 million which was spent over the last school year to support their operation in a Covid-19 environment.

The Safe and Sustainable Reopening of Schools

Throughout the pandemic, the Department of Education has worked intensively with public health professionals from across the health sector and the HSE to support schools. We have been guided by their expertise in all that we have done.

In advance of reopening, and indeed since schools have reopened, these experts have reviewed the measures put in place to ensure safe operation of schools and are satisfied that these infection prevention and control measures, when implemented correctly and adhered to, will continue to keep the school community safe.

These measures range from the reconfiguration of classrooms and other school spaces to support physical distancing to significant additional funding for additional cleaning and hygiene measures, as well as over 1,080 additional teaching posts to ensure appropriate distancing can be put in place. Funding has also been made available for additional administrative leave days for principals and to provide for substitution arrangements.

My Department has also issued updated advice to schools on good ventilation practices. For this new school year we are providing schools with CO2 monitors. These monitors will help to guide schools about when they need to open or close their windows to increase the ventilation. 25,000 CO2 monitors have been delivered to schools this week, and 96% of primary schools (including all special schools) have received their full allocation of CO2 monitors. Every post-primary school has received a minimum of 10 CO2 monitors.

Lennox Laboratories was on target to have the full amount of 35,000 CO2 monitors delivered to schools by the beginning of next week. Unfortunately, however, Lennox has been informed by the manufacturer that there is a delay with the delivery of the last batch of 10,000 CO2 monitors, due to a fault with the LCD display unit.

While I am disappointed at the news of a delay, Lennox Laboratories has identified options that should enable the remaining balance of CO2 monitors to be distributed to schools in late September/early October.

In the interim, the Department has advised schools that if they wish they can make arrangements directly for procuring the balance of its CO2 monitors directly themselves, rather than via the current arrangements.

Naturally, the safety of our school communities and indeed broader society has been greatly bolstered by Ireland's highly successful vaccination programme. Through the incredible efforts of everyone involved, over 90% of over 16s have been fully vaccinated, the highest such percentage in the EU, and nearly 87% of over 12s have received their full vaccination.

Cork Life Centre

Turning now to the second item for discussion today, "Formal Recognition, Sustainable Funding and Teaching Posts for Life Centre Cork", I am pleased that my Department, with support from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Cork ETB, has put in place a very significant package of funding and teaching hours, to which the Board of Cork Life Centre has responded positively stating that it recognises that it is a welcome step towards securing the sustainability of the Centre.

Shortly after I was appointed Minister last year, I met with Don O’Leary from the Cork Life Centre. The Centre provides a considerable service to a cohort of learners with a diverse range of needs. The outcomes of what is delivered in Cork Life Centre was evident before of this Committee last December when students from the Centre spoke with passion and clarity about their experiences and how the Centre has supported them in their journey through education.

Therefore, I am pleased that significant progress has been made regarding a package of support that will substantially increase the funding and teaching hours for the centre and will ensure that students continue to have the opportunity to access all which the centre has to offer.

School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health

The final item that was included in today’s invitation relates to the “Implementation of the Key Recommendations in the Joint Committee Report on School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health”.

Firstly, I would like to thank the Oireachtas Joint Committee for their work in this area.

For a child or young person, the experience of bullying can be a deeply traumatic one, and stands in direct opposition to the sense of security, opportunity, and nourishment which we hope all of our students feel in the school system. I know that bullying experienced by even one child or young person is one too many and I commit to doing all that I can to prevent its occurrence. Coming from the school sector, I know how seriously this issue is treated by schools, but I also know we must do all that we can to support schools in addressing it.

Ongoing work on anti-bullying

The Department has implemented a number of ongoing anti-bullying measures which include the following:

- implementing the anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools;
- monitoring of schools' anti-bullying measures by the Inspectorate;
- implementation of the wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice;
- provision of a greater focus on inclusive education in teacher training;
- provision of supports for schools in online safety;
- implementation of the SPHE and RSE curriculum;
- provision of funding to the NPC for anti-bullying training for parents;
- provision of funding to the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre towards its research and training programmes and for the national anti-bullying website www.tacklebullying.ie;
- provision of funding to Webwise.ie to promote the safe use of the internet and prevent cyber bullying;
- provision of funding to BeLonG To Youth Services to support delivery of the Stand Up! campaign in post primary schools.

However, I recognise that there is much more work that needs to be done in this area, and I am committed to doing this work.

New work on anti-bullying

In this regard, I wish to advise the Committee of a number of measures currently being undertaken by my Department.

I am pleased to be able to announce that, during this school year, the Inspectorate is prioritising monitoring and gathering information about the implementation of anti-bullying measures in schools across **all** its inspection types. As part of this work, the Inspectorate will also identify and report on examples of effective practice in relation to preventing and tackling bullying in schools. This will help provide evidence of the type of bullying that is occurring in our schools and examples of approaches that can be successful in dealing with it.

Starting this week also , the Inspectorate will be looking at bullying matters through a comprehensive programme of incidental inspections in primary and post-primary schools. These inspections will result in feedback to individual schools about how they are implementing anti-bullying procedures as well as the publication of an interim composite report on how the anti-bullying procedures are being implemented.

From the beginning of 2022, the monitoring of anti-bullying measures with schools will be extended to all inspection types and will include looking at the actions of the school to create a positive school culture as well as the implementation of important aspects of the anti-bullying procedures. The Inspectorate will, during Q3 and Q4 2022, carry out focused anti-bullying inspections in schools.

Review of action plan on bullying and anti-bullying procedures

I also am pleased to announce to the Committee that I have asked my Department to review and update the Action Plan on Bullying and the Anti-bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools.

This review will take account of developments and relevant research since the action plan and procedures were first published and will specifically consider areas such as cyber bullying and gender identity bullying.

This work will involve significant collaboration across my Department, with other Government Departments and Bodies, with the national anti-bullying research centre at DCU and will also involve consultation with a broad range of education stakeholders, including students.

As part of this work, my Department will give detailed consideration to the Recommendations contained in the Joint Committee's Report.

Charter Bill

I would also like to take this opportunity to advise the Committee that I am fully committed to progressing the Charter Bill through the Houses of the Oireachtas.

As advised during second stage, I am bringing forward amendments to the Bill to make it more inclusive of our entire school community.

I am proposing that the Bill be amended from a Student and Parent Charter to a School Community Charter. It is vitally important that the engagement and listening culture that the Charter provides for is inclusive of the whole school community which includes staff, students and parents.

Under this bill, schools will be required to provide a range of information to the school community on school plans and policies such as the school anti-bullying policy and also how complaints are dealt with. While we know that very many schools already provide this information, the bill will allow for consistency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I thank the committee for the invitation to attend today, to update on school reopening, the Cork Life Centre and to outline the measures that the Department is progressing to prevent and tackle bullying in schools, many of which relate to recommendations in the Joint Committee's Report.

I particularly want to acknowledge all the hard work that has been done by school communities in recent weeks. It is wonderful to see students back in their classrooms with their teachers, SNAs and support staff.

And now, Chair, with your agreement, I invite Minister of State Madigan to address the Committee.