

Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

**Plans of the Department of Education and Skills to enable and support
special education provision whilst minimizing the risk
of spreading covid-19 infections**

Opening Statement

Dalton Tattan, Assistant Secretary, Department of Education and Skills

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Chairperson,

Thank you for your invitation to attend today to engage with the Committee on plans of the Department of Education and Skills to enable and support special education provision whilst minimizing the risk of spreading covid-19 infections.

My name is Dalton Tattan and I am Assistant Secretary with responsibility for inclusion in the Department of Education and Skills. Attending with me are other

Department of Education and Skills colleagues. Eddie Ward is Principal Officer in the Department's Special Education section. Brendan Doody is Assistant Chief Inspector in the Department's Inspectorate. Anne Tansey is Director of NEPS – the National Educational Psychological Service.

School closures

The Taoiseach's announcement on 12 March last of the closure of all schools, colleges, universities and other training and learning facilities was the commencement of a series of challenges across the education and training sector as a result of Covid-19. The challenges continue to be managed by the Department of Education and Skills, the education partners and a range of stakeholders. The interests of students and their families as well as the safety of the staff in the sector have been the paramount considerations throughout.

Advice and guidance issued to the school sector following the school closures. All schools were asked to work to minimise the impact on teaching and learning, by continuing to plan lessons and, where possible, provide online resources for students or online lessons where schools were equipped to do so. Schools were

asked to be conscious of students that may not have access to online facilities and to consider this actively in their plans. Information was provided for teachers on a range of online resources to assist schools to provide ongoing support to students during school closures.

Following the decision that schools would remain closed after the initial period, more comprehensive guidance issued to all schools on supporting teaching and learning.

Specific guidance was also issued for those engaging with students with Special Educational Needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. Additional ICT grants and the creation of new resources have also been part of our response. There are many good examples illustrating how schools and teachers have developed innovative ways to connect with their students.

However, while most children have adapted reasonably well to the new circumstances, there is evidence that the absence of school and other supports is having a negative impact on the lives and wellbeing of many children with complex needs and their families. The loss of the regular school routine, social interaction with friends, access to teachers, Special Needs Assistants, therapy

services and respite-type supports are presenting a real risk of regression in the learning, the social and emotional development, and the wellbeing of these children. Furthermore, many families are reporting significant challenges caring for their children in the absence of these supports and routines.

Summer Programme

Phase 4 of the *Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business* sets out that educational institutions can open on a phased basis at the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year with a limited reopening provided from Phase 2 on 8 June 2020. Since the Government decision of 5 June, the Department has progressed plans for specific programmes and initiatives in relation to children with special educational needs.

Summer Provision 2020 – Reconnecting with Education is a significantly expanded programme for children with complex special educational needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage.

The summer programme includes–

- A Department of Education and Skills-led programme involving both a school-based strand and a home-based strand. They are focused on providing a foundation to re-establishing relationships and a sense of belonging and connectedness to school, to re-engaging with learning and support, and the successful transition or reintegration of students with their peers into their planned education setting for the next school year, and
- A Department of Health/HSE-led activity-based programme delivered in a school setting

In-school or home-based supports by teachers and SNAs will help to prevent regression amongst children with special needs.

Recognising the need to respond to the extraordinary circumstances this year, the eligibility criteria have been widened to provide for more children with special educational needs to qualify. In doing this the Department focused on those with the greatest level of need.

To be eligible, a child must fall into one of the following categories:

1. Pupils with a diagnosis of Autism
2. Pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties
3. Any child in a special class or special school
4. Children transitioning into a special class from early year settings to primary school
5. Pupils in primary school mainstream classes who present with the following disabilities:
 - Down Syndrome
 - Deaf or most severe hard of hearing
 - Blind or most severe visual impairment
 - Moderate general learning disability
 - Diagnosis of severe and emotional behavioural disorder

Comprehensive guidance and FAQs for the Programme have been published.

Participation in the programme by schools, teachers and Special Needs Assistants is voluntary. So far, the response is very positive with 200 schools registered to run the School-based Summer Education Programme. 36 schools, of whom 35 are also running the school-based programme, have registered to participate in the HSE-led programme of support for children with complex

needs. It is estimated that 3,400 children will benefit from these school-based programmes.

Almost 9,200 children are registered for the Home-based Programme.

Decisions in relation to summer provision must be underpinned by Public Health advice. The Department has this week issued guidance to all primary schools to help guide them in running the summer provision. This guidance is informed by our engagement with the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the Department of Health.

I thank the Committee for giving the Department of Education and Skills the opportunity to discuss these issues today.

My Colleagues and I are happy to take questions from the Committee on this matter.