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**Opening Statement to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response**

**John Boyle**

**INTO General Secretary**

*Thursday 3 July 2020*

*Check against delivery*

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*Chairperson and committee members, thank you for inviting the INTO to appear before you on this important issue.*

*Is mise John Boyle, Rúnaí Ginearálta Chumann Múinteoirí Éireann (INTO) agus tá Mary Magner ár Uachtarán in éineacht liom.*

*Covid-19 has had an unprecedented and devastating effect on Irish society, one that the country may take years to recover from. The repercussions will have the greatest impact on the vulnerable, and education is a key sector that can play a leading role in addressing the negative consequences.*

*The reopening of our schools will be an enormous logistical challenge.*

*Our members are unequivocally up for that challenge. They do so with the expectation that their views will be taken into account and their concerns fully addressed by government in a timely manner.*

*Priority must be given to the safety and physical and mental health and wellbeing of staff, pupils and parents in primary schools by minimising the risk of the introduction of Covid-19 into the school community and properly managing the risk of a spread of infection .*

*Children's learning and development, including their wellbeing, must be supported by schools and the relevant support services such as NEPS and CAMHS. These services, in turn, must have their capacity increased to cope with the needs of school communities.*

*A collaborative approach to developing and implementing procedures and protocols at national level is essential. While local schools will have to adapt protocols for their particular circumstances, individual schools cannot be asked to develop their own guidance.*

*Engagement with stakeholders is imperative and must continue at a faster pace.*

*For a full reopening of schools, a comprehensive level of staffing, including substitution for all absences, will be required. Supports to schools must ensure that no class needs to be divided in circumstances of teacher absence. It is imperative that the pilot scheme for Substitute Supply Panels be extended nationwide to ensure that teachers are readily available to cover teacher absences in every part of the country.*

*Adequate resources must be allocated to schools to implement the comprehensive health and safety measures required for schools to operate safely. This includes additional budgets for cleaning staff, equipment, and sanitising products. It must also take into account the need for schools to purchase additional educational resources, to minimise the necessity for sharing books, toys and other pieces of equipment.*

*In Ireland, in something of a national embarrassment, we have the largest class sizes in the Eurozone. Many of our primary school classrooms have more than thirty pupils, with our European neighbours enjoying an average of just twenty in a class. This really matters when*

*we look at applying social distancing. It's imperative that the new government deliver on its commitment to address this matter.*

*Assurances should be provided to schools that they will not be penalised in terms of future staffing where enrolment, as a result of non-attendance of pupils due to Covid-19 early in the 2020-2021 school year, falls below the staffing appointment and retention figures specified for 30 September.*

*There will be a need to accommodate a changed school environment. This must be taken into account by the Inspectorate, NCSE and other DES sections and agencies. It will be necessary to suspend inspections and initiatives other than those which are aimed at contributing to the school's efforts to maintain the health and well-being of the school community for the period of the crisis. INTO welcomes the announcement that no new school self-evaluation will be expected next year, and that the Inspectorate's role will be more advisory and supportive.*

*Communication via a national media campaign will be vital to ensure 'buy-in' from the entire school community in relation to new routines. Clear advice and guidance for parents in relation to supporting their children will be required. Changed expectations of schools, for example in relation to the ability to teach all parts of the curriculum or extra-curricular activities, may need to be spelled out to avoid misunderstanding.*

*School leaders will need access to training and additional leadership and management days to deal with the additional responsibilities that will fall on them, especially at the beginning of the school year. In addition, the introduction of planned changes to the system and all non-essential paperwork should be suspended for the duration of the Covid-19 crisis.*

*Staff and students returning to school on a full-time basis must do so with the assurance that they are returning to a teaching and learning environment where every precaution and practical step has been taken to protect them from Covid-19.*

*Schools must have certainty that parents will not be permitted to congregate at the school's facilities prior to and after school hours, as the congregation of adults will pose serious risks.*

*In particular, there must be an unambiguous message spelled out that schools cannot be places where people congregate, and only essential visitors will be allowed in the school buildings by appointment.*

*In the event that any school does not re-open fully or if any class or school has to close again at a future date, a contingency plan providing appropriate supports including ICT facilities to facilitate the continuity of learning remotely must be put in place. It will not be possible for the same teacher to simultaneously plan, prepare and mediate the curriculum for their pupils who are in school and at home.*

*Careful, thorough and properly-funded preparations must be put in place in the coming weeks to facilitate the return to school premises, as the reality of large class sizes and years*

*of under-investment in school facilities has exacerbated the challenges now facing school communities.*

*I look forward to your questions.*

*Go raibh céad maith agaibh.*