



Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

TUI Opening Statement

Thursday, 2nd July 2020 – 2.30pm

The Teachers' Union of Ireland is very pleased to have this opportunity to discuss with the Special Committee the question of effecting a safe return to school as early as possible for the greatest possible number of students. We would also welcome an opportunity in the near future to discuss with you these issues as they relate to Further and Higher Education.

The TUI represents teachers and other education grades in post primary schools and colleges, centres of education, institutes of technology and technological universities. Our 19,500 members deliver a high-quality public education across a wide range of settings.

We are very conscious of the fact that, notwithstanding the very significant efforts made to ensure continuity and quality of service in an online environment, nothing can match or satisfactorily replace the live setting of a classroom.

It is our ambition to have a return to those classrooms as soon as possible and we are wholly committed to working with Department of Education and Skills and the partners in the education sector to that end. In fact, the greatest source of frustration for us so far has been that progress is too slow.

This has been the case largely because of the need to await definitive advice from the public health authorities in respect of the education sector.

Social distancing

The piece of the jigsaw that has been missing and that is most needed is clear direction about social distancing. We assume, but do not yet know, that the current requirement of two metres is likely to be modified. We hear various commentators speculate or insist that there will be no social distancing requirement at all in a school setting, or at least in a

classroom setting. However when we, as practitioners, whose workplace is the classroom, consider the practical logistics of a school, its less than generous dimensions, its congested corridors, its limited entry and exit points, its often inadequate toilet facilities, we are not convinced or satisfied that schools can reopen safely, given current circumstances, in the absence of some defined metric regarding social distancing.

Second level schools and Youthreach centres were not built to accommodate the exigencies of a pandemic. The architecture of schools is predicated on congregating students, precisely what the current crisis demands that we avoid

Students

The TUI is also concerned that some of the public discourse is peddling a myth that the virus is not transmitted by children. While there is evidence that young children are less susceptible to the virus than other cohorts of the population, it is also the case that older students have been shown both to contract and to transmit the virus.

Indeed, in a post primary context the word “child” itself is problematic, in that it is a legal construct that rather misses the point that in many of our post-primary classrooms the smallest person physically is the teacher. Students from their mid-teens on tend to have vibrant and lightly supervised social lives. To consider them children for the purposes of planning the reopening of school is a mistake. They are young adults and often indulge in adult behaviors and therefore carry with them, as do other adults, the risk of contracting and spreading the virus. Therefore, the TUI refers to students as opposed to children

Duty of care

As teachers our members have a duty of care to their students. As a teachers’ trade union, we also owe a duty of care to our members. In both cases that duty consists first and foremost of seeking to safeguard their health.

Supports

The TUI, while having a strong view in terms of the need for additional supports and staffing, accepts that not all of these will be immediately available. However, if government wants to approach the reopening of schools with realism it must provide some additionality.

Cleaning

For example, the budget available to schools for cleaning is slight to poor and that is in the context of normal circumstances. In the context of Covid it is wholly inadequate. Proper cleaning is essential and, therefore, so also is a proper budget for cleaning.

Support for principal teachers

Documentation that has been produced so far is replete with references to “the school”. The school will do this and the school will do that. The school does nothing. People do. Specifically, in the context of preparation for reopening, it is assumed that, by default, the principal teacher will do everything. Principal teachers need support, and quickly, so that, in each school, the planning and preparation for safe return can be advanced, the attendant protocols put in place and all of this in a timely fashion well ahead of re-opening date. We do not have much time for this so delay is to be avoided.

Classroom capacity and staffing

A very significant adjustment will be required in terms of where and how to accommodate students. If, for example, social distancing means that a class of thirty 6th year students can be accommodated only by using two classrooms simultaneously, the requisite technology for live delivery and for remote delivery must be in place. There must also be a presiding teacher in each room. The TUI has suggested and that to meet the need for additional staff, students in the second year of the Professional Master of Education Program be fast-tracked into paid teaching.

Those who cannot yet return

Regard must be had also to the inevitability that an indeterminate proportion of students and of teachers will not be able safely to return, because of underlying health conditions or

because they are otherwise in high risk categories. Provision will have to be made for both cohorts - for the teachers to teach and the students to be taught remotely.

Hard-to-reach students

It is common knowledge that there is also a cohort of students that has not been able to engage or simply that has not engaged with the online delivery of classes that commenced on the 13th of March, notwithstanding every endeavour of their teachers. These hard-to-reach students often suffer multiple disadvantage. It must be a priority of the education system to have these students re-engage. Failure to achieve this will result in deficits that will in many instances be life-long.

Merely reopening schools will not, of itself, suffice for this cohort. A structured, targeted programme of interventions will be required.

Students with SEN

Another cohort of students for whom the period of school closure has presented a very particular challenge is students with special educational needs. For many of them the absence of the social milieu of the school has been extremely disruptive and confusing. While getting those students back into the classroom is a necessary first step, it is only that, a first step. Specific, customised interventions and supports will be required to re-establish the connections that have been severed.

Atypical timetables

Of course, we will have to plan for the possibility of an unorthodox and abnormal pattern of reopening and return, for a partial return, a staggered return. We will need timetables unlike any that would normally apply. Consideration may have to be given to prioritising certain groups within the school community, sixth years perhaps, maybe first years, students with special educational needs or those suffering most acute disadvantage. This raises a political question both nationally and locally because while, in theory, there might be broad agreement that such prioritisation is necessary, in practical terms and within households there may be resentment if the children of those households are not among the prioritised.

Curriculum and assessment

A consequence of the move from on-site to online teaching and learning is that certain elements of the curriculum have not been and cannot for the foreseeable future be completed. Especially affected have been practical subjects and it is entirely possible that those same subjects will be the ones most difficult to deliver for as long as restrictions have to apply. Even at this remove from next summer, it would seem harsh and unreasonable to expect students to face examinations that assume completion of the syllabi. Therefore, adjustments will have to be made and they are probably best made by using the assessment instruments rather than by specific curtailment of syllabi.

School Transport

I will briefly deal with the matter of school transport about which I must warn you I am no expert. However, this much is clear - it may be logistically difficult to arrange for students to be transported to school but it is vital that it be done. To confine myself to one example, if a student who already suffers educational and socioeconomic disadvantage does not have access to school transport there is not the slightest chance that he or she will be able to attend, will reengage.

It cannot be assumed that his or her family will be able to arrange the transport independently.

While school transport is important in urban areas many of those areas do have the alternative of public transport, all of them have better pathway and cycle facilities. In rural areas, where often there is deep seated inter-generational socioeconomic disadvantage, few if any alternatives exist and the distances to be covered are greater.

Conclusion

I wish in conclusion to come back to the matter of safety. The TUI has stated emphatically and repeatedly that we will operate in accordance with the public health advice that is current. We will not put our students, their families, their communities and their teachers (our members) at risk.

Post primary students have no magical immunity. Teachers as workers have no magical immunity. They must be treated as are other workers. They must have confidence that their safety is being protected and that they are not being lulled into or forced into a false and dangerous sense of security. Other workers are protected by social distancing, developed and comprehensive return to workplace plans carefully implemented, personal protective equipment where necessary. Teachers ask no more than to be treated with the same level of concern.

We recognise clearly the importance to families, businesses and the broader community of a reopening of schools. We wish to and will play our part in that reopening but we must do so and will do so with eyes wide open, with due vigilance.

What we need now and what the education system needs now is intensive engagement by the partners to ensure that the reopening of schools for the greatest number at the earliest possible time can proceed. We look forward to the engagement that we know to be imminent, the plan that we know to be needed and the commitment of all that we know to be readily available. We have a practical challenge and need a set of practical solutions.