

Opening Statement

Kieran Christie General Secretary ASTI

Chairman,

Firstly, I want to thank you and this committee for the invitation to attend today and the opportunity to address you.

You have previously received our submission and the text of this opening statement which I am about to deliver.

At the outset, I want to make it clear that the strong desire and objective of the ASTI and its members is the reopening of schools and their classrooms as soon as possible. While enormous efforts were made by teachers and students by way of remote engagement since the school closures in March, notwithstanding the digital divide and other issues that frustrated the efforts of all concerned, it is clear that nothing can replace the vital interaction that takes place in classrooms.

However, the reopening must be done in a manner that is safe and enjoys the confidence of all concerned.

Our submission to this committee ranged across a variety of salient issues regarding the challenges for re-opening of schools and procedures that will need to be put in place. I will be happy to expand on any of these later.

These include

- 1)** Ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of students, teachers and other school personnel
- 2)** Adjusting the physical infrastructure to maintain social distancing
- 3)** Implementing the Return to Work Safely protocol as it will apply in schools and ensuring compliance
- 4)** Attending to the needs of vulnerable members of the school community
- 5)** Dealing with the enormity of the initiative overload burden placed on schools in recent years and rebalancing the Inspection process in schools so that these don't constitute a barrier to an efficient school reopening and the making up for lost time.
- 6)** Addressing the impact on students, teaching and learning and the challenges of potential staggered attendance that may still be necessary for a time. In relation to a blended learning approach, a whole raft of issues that have arisen and will have to be addressed regarding remote teaching and digital literacy skills.

- 7) It will be important to address the equity issues that were thrown into the limelight in such a stark manner after the school closures in March as a matter of urgent priority at national and school level.
- 8) Students with special and additional educational needs have suffered enormously during this period. Their needs will have to be addressed.

In addition to these as set out in our submission I would like to make the following points.

I mentioned the absolute desire of the ASTI and its members is the full reopening of schools as soon as possible and in a safe manner. Indeed, school leaders and teachers are crying out for guidance on how it can be achieved. There is no doubt that the key to achieving this will be predicated on achieving the confidence of teachers, students and parents in the process. We have seen what has happened in other jurisdictions when this has not happened. In England, attendance rates have been very curtailed for those who have been entitled to return to school, purely because parents are not convinced of the safety in doing so.

Of course, ASTI takes a wider view, but as a trade union it must pay particular attention to the interests of its members. The simple reality is that ASTI members, like all workers must return to Covid-19 secure workplaces. Nothing less will be acceptable.

I also want to address the controversy that arose after the publication of the report to Government by the Minister for Education and Skills on June 12th entitled *“Planning for reopening schools in line with the Roadmap for reopening society and business.”*

Regarding the physical distancing requirements in school settings the report contained a line that caused considerable consternation amongst our members to put it mildly.

“A differentiated approach to physical distancing in schools versus requirements for other parts of society or business could be considered appropriate and reasonable when the particular nature of the school environment is considered”

The ASTI would be very concerned if a differentiated approach to physical distancing is introduced for schools in the Autumn.

An inferior approach to physical distancing in schools from that which pertains to wider society or any deviation from the health advice available from the NPHE or the HPSC would be unacceptable.

In fact, any deviation from the health advice available from the National Public Health Emergency Team or the Health Protection Surveillance Centre of the HSE would be unacceptable.

From our perspective, there simply cannot be rules on physical distancing that apply outside a school in wider society or business that don't apply inside a school.

We note that our neighbours in Northern Ireland currently plan to reopen their schools in the Autumn with a social distancing regime in place.

We have been heartened that the interim advice issued by the HPSC and acted upon by the Department of Education and Skills regarding the operation of summer programmes being provided in schools does include a social distancing regime for staff and students.

ASTI has a significant number of members with underlying conditions or are immunocompromised or indeed are living with others in similar categories and are extremely worried about returning to workplaces that place them in greater danger of contracting or transmitting the virus than if they worked in another environment.

They worry if they will be covid-19 secure working in a classroom with thirty students, no PPE and with weak social distancing or none. Members are sceptical that this would be safe.

We note that in England, clinically vulnerable individuals are advised not to work outside the home including education staff. We think that staff in this position should be similarly advised here.

We don't have any expertise but what we read regarding the developing science relating to the virus seems to suggest that children below the age of ten probably pose no threat regarding transmission of the disease to an adult. However, all the students in second-level schools are over twelve years of age and several of the senior students will be over eighteen.

The science might move on this question and it would be great if it did but there doesn't seem to be any significant body of scientific opinion saying second-level students are not vectors of the virus as equally there is none saying that they are.

The Science appears to be inconclusive on children as vectors of Covid-19 but presumably over 18s cannot be regarded similarly.

When you have regard to all the circumstances, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there will still remain a necessity for a blended learning model of some sort upon reopening of our schools and some phasing of the return to school may be necessary. Given the fact

that we have among the most overcrowded classrooms in the OECD countries and the requirement for a social distancing regime, it seems to us that no matter how creative schools are in using their available rooms and facilities, you simply will not be able to accommodate everyone on a full time basis. Even a one metre social distancing provision is an issue for our big classes. There is the additional consideration that a number of staff members and students, because of their vulnerabilities, may still have to work or study outside of the classroom.

Enormous difficulties will also have to be overcome in the management of practical classes in woodwork rooms, metalwork rooms, Art rooms, PE, Music and Home Economics, together with the cleaning requirements necessary between classes.

We think that the task will be extremely difficult, but not insurmountable.

ASTI will play a full and constructive role in the reopening of our schools. We will do this by engaging with the Department of Education and Skills and all the other relevant stakeholders to ensure a safe reopening of our schools to the maximum extent possible. It is only an agreed set of protocols that enjoy the trust and confidence of all the stakeholders that will secure that objective, thus decreasing anxiety and supporting the health of the entire school community.