

Opening Statement – Páirc Clerkin, IPPN CEO

The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) is the professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools and provides a variety of supports and services to almost 6,500 Principals and Deputy Principals. I have been a principal since 2001 in St Patrick's NS in Diswellstown, Dublin 15, a mainstream school with 44 staff and almost 800 pupils. I was appointed as CEO of IPPN in 2017.

As outlined in our 17th June submission to the Committee, IPPN made a detailed submission to the Department on 13th May in relation to the reopening of schools. Progress has been made in relation to several aspects of that submission, including the provision of some guidelines and templates and the preparation of training for staff. We were reassured that our recommendation to pause new initiatives and school inspections, until at least early 2021, is being implemented.

This respects school staff, who must prioritise getting their schools up and running in very changed circumstances.

An important clarification to make is that schools are not 'reopening', as such, school buildings are reopening. Staff and, in particular, school leaders have been working incredibly hard in very difficult circumstances since school buildings were closed on 12th March, to facilitate remote learning and do all the other planning that must happen in all schools throughout the year. School leaders will also be working throughout the summer to prepare their schools to safely welcome back the pupils and staff in late August/early September. So the language around this is important.

IPPN has been working closely with our fellow education stakeholders, primarily the management bodies and INTO, but also with education centres, DCU, health and safety expert and former president of NAPD Shay Bannon, and PDST, among others, to provide a suite of supports relating to remote learning, and also the 'reopening' of schools for summer provision and the new school year.

IPPN has developed a comprehensive Resource Bundle, which was submitted to the Committee yesterday, and will be available to school leaders. The Resource Bundle collates all of the guidance, planning and other templates, checklists, FAQs and training materials that have been developed. This will assist schools to develop and implement their plans to ensure a safe return to the school building for all members of their school community. We have committed to keeping this resource updated as further guidance and resources are approved by the DES, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) and the Health and Safety Authority (HSA).

While there are any number of aspects we could cover today, in the interest of brevity I will highlight the key recommendations and challenges that have yet to be fully addressed, as follows:

1. **DES Guidelines for the reopening of schools were issued on 29th June and HSE/HPSC** interim recommendations for the reopening of schools were issued on 1st July. There is insufficient detail in relation to a number of matters, including:

- a. the deployment of shared Special Education Teachers within and among schools
- b. school transport
- c. the funding of cleaning/hygiene requisites and PPE
- d. additional training
- e. and the role of and appointment process for the Compliance Officer and Staff rep, as well other staffing matters. Clear guidance in relation to the remaining issues needs to be provided to all schools as soon as possible, as well as the remaining checklists, which have been in progress for some time.

2. **A critical issue is the need for additional leadership and management time to be provided to teaching principals** to flexibly meet the needs of their schools. Simply put, they cannot be expected to teach as well as lead their schools through the reopening phase.

3. To enable schools to manage during the reopening phase, **substitute cover is needed for every absence.**

4. Schools also need to have **flexibility in how they allocate staff** to comply with social distancing requirements, including arrangements for shared Special Education and EAL Teachers who work in multiple classrooms and/or in multiple schools, while ensuring that the most vulnerable children receive the required support.

5. **Additional funding** must be provided to schools **up front** to enable them to implement the guidelines in full. In addition, the **centralised procurement and distribution** to all schools of **appropriate and sufficient PPE equipment and cleaning materials** prior to their full reopening in the autumn would greatly alleviate schools of a significant burden over the summer months. The proposed procurement framework is a positive development but it must include PPE equipment as well as sanitiser – this will be critical, especially for special schools and schools with children with special needs in mainstream schools.

6. **Training specific to schools is needed, particularly in relation to supporting children with special educational needs**, as there are specific concerns and issues that will pose significant challenges for school staff with regard to intimate care needs. In addition, specific training is required for cleaning staff, staff reps, compliance officers and school leaders. The training being prepared by the HSA needs to be expanded to address these cohorts.

Special Schools face huge challenges in reopening their school buildings in September. They will require extra personnel and PPE equipment, as well as very clear guidance and training on the intimate care challenges they will face day-to-day in schools, and funding to support the purchase of extra resources to limit the sharing of materials in or between classes.

7. **School leaders will need support in implementing the safety aspects of reopening as well as in relation to teaching and learning in a much altered environment.** ‘Developing schools’, newly-amalgamated schools, schools with recently-appointed principals and those setting up new special classes in September will all need additional support this year, given all the extra work all schools will have to undertake. Special consideration must also be given to schools undergoing significant repairs due to the Western Building Systems issue, where expected completion dates cannot now be met

due to the length of the recent lockdown and school leaders and Boards of Management are faced with the extra difficult logistics issue of ensuring the safety of pupils and staff in greatly compromised situations. As school inspections have been paused until at least early 2021, the **role of inspectors** should be temporarily redirected to support schools to get back up and running and to restore normality. However, this it must be a collaborative, rather than an inspection-based approach.

8. **No school should lose a staff member** owing to COVID-19 e.g. parental decision to keep children at home/defer their child's start in junior infants

9. **School transport** will be a significant issue in many schools, and particularly challenging for special schools. The HPSC/HSE guidance does not clarify whether distancing on school transport is to be at 1m or 2m, and also the specific guidance for drivers, escorts and pupils availing of school transport – buses as well as taxis. This needs to be urgently clarified.

10. **Centralised communications to be provided to schools and parents** to indicate clearly that schools have to balance the safety of the school community with a child's right to an education.

IPPN President, Damian White and I welcome the opportunity to discuss these, and other relevant points, further with the Committee.