

**Opening Remarks by Mr Seán Ó Foghlú, Secretary General, Department of Education
at the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response, July 10th, 2020.**

I thank the committee for the invitation to attend today and to engage with you on the planning to support the re-opening of the school sector. I am the Secretary General in the Department of Education and attending with me are Deirdre Shanley, Hubert Loftus and Aoife Conduit who are Assistant Secretaries in the Department, Yvonne Keating Deputy Chief Inspector in the Department and Anne Tansey, Director of the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS.

The then 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. Those challenges continue to be managed by the Department, 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 as we have worked through the challenges before us. Currently, the number one priority for the Department and the wider schools sector is to re-open our schools as fully, normally and safely as possible at the start of the new school year.

In re-opening our schools, we will be guided by the available public health advice and comprehensive engagement with stakeholders including the school management bodies and staff representatives as well as students and parents. Since the Department received the interim public health advice from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre in June it has been published by the Minister and made available to schools across the country.

The receipt of the public health advice has allowed us to commence an intense period of engagement with school management and staff representatives which in turn has allowed us to engage with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. There is no doubt that the Minister, the Department, school leaders and staff all want to see schools re-opening as normal in the new school year in late August and September.

The public health recommendations will be updated as the summer progresses. The current advice provides an excellent platform for engagement with all of the education partners towards detailed planning for re-opening our schools. The recommendations recognise that different approaches are necessary for children at different ages and stages.

Our engagement with stakeholders which is continuing right throughout this week, including today, has been open and frank with everyone acknowledging that we need to work together. We are collectively focussed on working through the detail of what the return to school will look like for all schools – primary, post-primary, special schools; those in urban or rural settings; large schools or small schools. The range of school settings presents both opportunities and challenges and flexibilities or agility in how we respond will be key. We are working through with school managers, leaders and staff how best they can be supported to not only open schools but ensure that they remain open.

There are logistical challenges to manage whether in terms of physical distancing arrangements, school transport or enhancing cleaning and hygiene routines, for example. There are wellbeing aspects to be identified and provided for students, their families and staff. There are curricular challenges which are being worked on in conjunction with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. There are also assessment matters to consider in terms of the students undertaking State examinations in 2021 with the State Examinations Commission involved in this aspect.

Work is advancing intensely across all of these strands.

One of the key elements to ensuring that schools once they re-open can remain open is to prevent the Covid-19 virus from getting into a school in the first instance. This will mean students, their families and staff playing their roles in keeping the virus out of their school by ensuring those who have symptoms or suspect they have the virus stay out of school; by maintaining best practice in terms of hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette in school and by minimising social contacts and respecting physical distancing practices.

The public health advice which has been published recognises that physical distancing in a school context has some specific elements acknowledging that:

“The principle of distancing can be usefully applied in the school setting, allowing for some flexibility when needed. ... However, it must be applied in a practical way, recognising that the learning environment cannot be dominated by a potentially counterproductive focus on this issue”

Physical distancing measures fall into two broad categories – (i) Increasing Separation; and (ii) Decreasing Interaction.

Increasing Separation means that all available space in the school should be availed of in order to safely maximise physical distancing and that the class space should be reconfigured to maximise physical distancing.

Decreasing Interaction means that the extent to which this is practical will depend on the school setting. A common-sense approach is required in recognising the limits to which decreasing interaction between pupils can be achieved.

Re-opening our schools is not just a matter of achieving a certain minimum physical distancing; it is about getting students re-engaged fully with learning; socialising with their peers; for some preparing for examinations; for others transitioning to school life or to a different level in terms of moving from primary to post-primary. Students need the support of their families, teachers and school staff in re-adjusting to school life and physical learning environments again.

It is realistic to predict that all students, teachers and parents will experience a broad range of feelings as part of the return to school. This may include a mixture of excitement, happiness and relief but may also include anxiety and fear. This is understandable given these circumstances and the Department is developing with other stakeholders a response to support the wellbeing of our school communities as part of the planning to return to school.

Our focus, since we received the public health advice, has been on working through with the stakeholders how we re-open our schools safely.

We know there will be costs associated with re-opening and not just in terms of hand sanitisation or cleaning regimes but in terms of teacher and SNA substitution and support for school leaders. We are currently defining what is needed and preparing cost estimates for these elements. Engagement with our colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is underway in regard to the financial support that will be necessary.

I can assure the Committee that there is full engagement with the education stakeholders and that everyone is committed to concluding the scoping and planning phases by the end of this month so that schools have sufficient time to prepare at a local level for their re-opening. There will also be comprehensive communication with students and parents so that they are fully informed.

Finally, I thank the Committee for giving the Department the opportunity to discuss school re-opening today. My colleagues and I are happy to take questions from Members on this matter.