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**REF SCC19R-1-0195 Submissions on Covid 19 Return to School**

Dear Aileen,

Further to your email of the 10<sup>th</sup> June, we attach here our Submission on the Re-opening of Primary Schools during the Covid 19 Pandemic, as requested.

Kindest regards,

Asiya Al Tawash,  
Chairperson,  
MPEB.



## **Muslim Primary Education Board**

**Submission to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response**

**On**

**Re-opening of Primary Schools during the Covid 19 Pandemic**

Muslim Primary Education Board

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The Muslim Primary Education Board (MPEB) is a Management Body representing the Patron of two Muslim National Schools in Dublin and also strives to represent the interests of thousands of Muslim children attending schools throughout Ireland.

According to the 2016 Census, there were almost 65,000 Muslims living in Ireland including almost 11,000 primary school-aged children and over 5,000 in post primary schools. The Muslim population in Ireland continues to grow and has almost doubled since 2006, indicating that the number of Muslim children entering the Irish school system continues to increase.

The MPEB would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to make a submission to the discussion on return to school in September 2020. As the MPEB represents primary schools our submission will address the primary sector. Principals and school leaders have been consulted while preparing this submission.

Since the close of school, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, schools have shown their commitment to pupils and their families. We would like to acknowledge all the work undertaken by all school stakeholders during the current Covid 19 pandemic. School Management, Principals, teachers, staff, parents and pupils who have worked together to maintain continuity of learning, often in the most innovative ways and in the most difficult and unprecedented of times.

We look forward to the reopening of schools and return to classroom based teaching but would stress that this should only happen, when safe to do so.

It is clear that the planned return to school in September 2020 poses a number of challenges and will be unknown territory for all. Boards of Management, some appointed for the first time in November 2019, are voluntary bodies who give of their time to run schools have no expertise on return to school in the current Covid 19 pandemic. Boards will be relying on clear timely advice, grounded on a scientific basis to allow a safe and confident return to school for all concerned. Any return to the classroom should be supported by the HSE and Public Health advice.

## **Guidance**

**The Return to Work Protocol** and the **Planning for Opening Schools in line with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business** form a starting point and give some indication as to what may be required of schools returning to classrooms. A guidance document and roadmap for schools, laying out steps and timings is required for the unique school situation.

<https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.pdf>

A school Covid 19 Return to School Roadmap must be developed and be in place, with relevant policies and protocols, before return to school. As the end of June is the planning period for the September return, it is imperative that **a clear roadmap for schools** is developed as a **matter of urgency**.

## 1. Social Distancing

Social Distancing will, depending on advice given to schools by the Dept of Education together with health officials, impact on aspects of the school day and the attendance of pupils.

A number of challenges will face schools, including:

- The accommodation of large class sizes, rearrangement of shared space.
- Staggered attendance at school with some pupils in school and some distance learning.
- Division of the school day with classes coming in for part days. This would require extra cleaning between sessions and would pose significant challenges to the school transport system.
- Staggered breaks to allow for social distancing
- Distanced continuity learning, if needed, will bring challenges with regard to pupils' access to technology and broadband.

While current thought is to bring all children back to school in September with reduced social distancing, this may be revisited in the case of a spike in new Covid 19 cases, a rise in community transmission rates or outbreaks in schools. **Clear guidelines and contingency planning** will be required for such circumstances.

## 2. School Transport

There are particular concerns for the MPEB with regard to the transport of children from the wider Dublin area into schools. The majority of pupils attending Muslim schools do not live in the school catchment area and travel wide distances, spending extended periods of time on the bus to and from school.

Current Covid 19 public transport guidelines require social distancing that will require an increase in capacity to the school transport.

In one of our schools 81% of currently enrolled pupils travel on school transport, consisting of five school buses, a minibus and six SEN children who come in two taxis. The school Principal has spoken to Bus Eireann and understands that more than double the current transport would be required if social distancing is implemented, taking into account family groupings.

While pupils may be distanced in classrooms, either by social distancing or groupings, and breaks may be staggered to limit contact, large numbers of children travelling to and from school without distancing could pose a threat of infection across a whole school population.

Will the School Transport Section of the Dept. of Education and Skills require protocols for school transport vehicles and personnel with regard to cleaning of school transport ventilation of buses?

### 3. Hand Hygiene/Toilets/Cleaning

- Hand hygiene will be central to return to school. A protocol must be established in conjunction with home to promote hand hygiene. This will become part of a wider hand hygiene emphasis throughout the day, with children being encouraged in both proactive and reactive hand hygiene.
- Not all schools will have hot water provision for hand washing. Hand sanitizer products and dispensers will be necessary in schools for both children and adults, central procurement and distribution of sanitizer/dispenser and any PPE that schools may need will avoid schools competing against each other for supplies and reduced cost. Some schools are already sourcing sanitizer and PPE at considerable cost as they fear it may not be available nearer to reopening.
- PPE may be required for pupils and staff in certain circumstances.
- All toilets and particularly central toilet blocks will require extra and regular cleaning both during and at the end of each day. General cleaning will also be required throughout the day both in classrooms and the common areas. Extra cleaning hours, ppe for cleaning staff and cleaning products will require additional funding.
- Training for cleaning staff with regard to infection control and appropriate cleaning protocols
- Protocols for outbreak of Covid 19 in a school.

### 4. Pupils and Families

Return to school, while happily anticipated by most pupils, may be an anxious time for some.

The reconnection of children with school and peers is of huge importance for wellness and continued learning within a **safe** environment. Schools look forward to welcoming pupils, both current and incoming, and re-establishing routines.

The psychological and health needs of pupils will be of concern to families and schools, new routines and protocols may be frightening and separation from home and family an anxious time for some children.

Issues to be addressed may include:

- Information for current and incoming parents on school protocols and procedures, parental support will be of huge importance in reinforcing the safety measures taken by schools.
- Information modules for parents on how best to support a child's return to school.
- Protocols for when a pupil is ill or diagnosed with Covid 19
- The reconnection of pupils and their families with the school community.
- The development of specific wellness based modules within the curriculum and support for teaching staff as to how best to deliver content.
- NEPS support for schools, especially where children may have lost a family member.
- Protocols pertaining to the care of vulnerable children with underlying medical conditions. How will they re-join school, what extra precautions may be needed for their protection?

- The importance of the reconnection of pupils with special educational needs with school routines, staff and peers.
- Strategies developed to assist all those who have experienced significant delays or regressions within their learning.
- Strategies for the reengagement and retention of disengaged pupils and families.

## 5. Staff Care

As employers, the school Board of Management, have regard for the safety and wellbeing of their staff and seek to support them in a safe and confident return to school.

- Staff will require clear, timely information on plans for a safe return to school including policies, protocols and procedures.
- Availability of wellness programmes for staff.
- Protocols for schools should a staff member be diagnosed with Covid 19.
- Vulnerable staff members with underlying health conditions within a school and their ability to continue to work.
- The sourcing of substitutes to cover vulnerable staff or those who may become ill, cover of general absences. The possibility of establishing substitute panels or hubs to serve local schools.
- Training with regard to infection control measures for all staff
- Ongoing CPD in case of a return to distance learning.

## In Conclusion

### Urgency, clarity and resources.

- As September is now less than ten weeks away and the Primary school year is drawing to a close, **it is a matter of urgency that school Boards of Management receive a clear guidance for reopening of schools with advice and support for its implementation.** Principals, when consulted, indicated that they felt overwhelmed by the number of challenges and a lack of clear guidelines.
- Principals also expressed concerns that those schools with fewer financial resources would be disadvantaged in their ability to provide a safe environment. Extra resources both financial and support based will be needed to underpin school reopening.
- A contingency plan will be necessary in case of closure of all schools, individual schools or classes, including guidelines and support for distanced continuous learning.
- Schools need to be advised of transport arrangements and protocols well before school reopening.

- A national 'return to school' campaign could be undertaken in the media promoting the most important back to school messages such as hand hygiene, coughing etiquette, not coming to school when feeling unwell. Information on infection control should be supplied to all staff and school hygiene protocols to all school stakeholders.
- Provision of additional funding will be required for extra cleaning routines and central procurement and funding for essential supplies of sanitizer and equipment.
- Boards of Management may need access to medical and health and safety expertise as situations arise

Covid 19 has impacted all members of school communities. Boards of Management strive to provide a school environment with regard for the health and wellness of all its employees, pupils and wider school community. Boards are eager to put into place the necessary strategies to facilitate a safe and healthy return to school and await, as a matter of urgency, Dept of Education guidance toward that end.

