



## **Written Submission to the “Special Committee on Covid-19 Response” on the Practicalities of Return to School and the Leaving Certificate 2020**

The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals is the professional association for second level school leaders in Ireland. Established in 1998, NAPD, through its Officers, National Executive and Regional Network provides a united voice for principals and deputy principals on issues of common concern across all three second level sectors. There are 756 post primary schools and FET colleges in Ireland. There are over 1750 Principals and Deputy Principals providing leadership in these schools.

NAPD is a respected education partner represented on relevant local, regional and national bodies both statutory and non-statutory. The Association represents the views of Principals and Deputy Principals to the Department of Education and Skills and shows leadership in the formulation of education policy. The key priority is to enable the principal and deputy to be the leader of learning in their school. NAPD is dynamic, pro-active solution focused and outward looking.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, NAPD has endeavoured to support post primary school leaders in their task of ensuring the continuity of learning and teaching following the need to close schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19. NAPD has developed and sourced resources of strategic benefit to our members as well as the wider school community and have shared them with our members via our website and our mailing list. Through our engagement with the DES Communications Group and the Advisory Group for Contingency Planning for State Examinations 2020, the Association has contributed to the continuity of learning and the journey to the introduction and implementation of the Calculated Grades as a safe alternative to the Leaving Certificate exam.

Over the last number of weeks, the Association has also been busily involved with school leaders in the post primary and the FET sector in strategically examining the possibilities and challenges involved in the safe reopening of schools in September. The following document is derived from the work of many serving school leaders who have made written submissions or have verbally communicated ideas or identified areas of concern at either regional, executive or committee online meetings. Throughout this process the contributions and identification of specific challenges has always been in the hope of providing the best education as is practicable while complying to the national Health and Safety guidance.

## 1.1 Challenges for re-opening of schools and procedures that will need to be put in place

- *Return to work protocol:* This needs to be a clear document which is cognisant of the school environment and the availability of resources both physically and in terms of personnel. To enable the school leader to concentrate on teaching and learning, some form of COVID-19 supervisor (separate from the role of Lead Worker) is needed up to Christmas and maybe beyond.
- *Hygiene/Cleaning:* Guidance on the standards and frequency of cleaning required and a clear specification on the products to be used. This additional cleaning requirement will need to be resourced financially.
- *Policy Templates:* There will be a need for development of some new school policies and to update many school policies considering the need for prevention of the spread of COVID-19. There is scope for the development of standard policy templates centrally to be used locally in insuring compliance with HSE guidelines on preventing the spread of COVID-19.
  - Sample Health & Safety Statement Template
  - Flexibility for School Calendar – circular needed
  - Sign-Sign out Policy
  - Contact Tracing Policy
  - Working from Home Policy
  - AUP - Acceptable Usage Policy
  - Visitors to the school Policy
  - School meeting Policy
  - Parent teacher meeting Policy
  - Dropping and collecting; Transport guidance for parents

Such templates and Policies can be developed centrally and implemented locally taking each school context into consideration.

- Need to plan for the safe continuity of education for students in the event of a second wave of the COVID-19 virus or in the event of the necessity of localised school closures.

## 2.1 How schools will operate under social distancing

- Schools need to know what social distance to plan for 1m, 1.5m, 2m as this will dictate the numbers who can safely attend schools and ultimately the model of engagement to be adopted.
- Special provisions, including a designated room, for those who become ill in school or for those with high risk conditions.
- Increased levels of supervision required to ensure social distancing and COVID-19 compliance.
- Increased support for school leaders to plan, organise and implement sustainable, workable COVID-19 communication, prevention and response strategies.

## 3.1 Impact on teachers and other staff

- Need to rebuild confidence in the safety of the school as a work environment.
- Wellbeing support for students, teachers and school leaders as schools reopen.
- Staff too need time to adapt to their new reality, how staff shall communicate with each other, share spaces, be safe, feel less threatened, be inducted back to work.
- Special considerations must be given to and provision made for students and staff with an underlying condition that makes them vulnerable to COVID-19.

- Will some students, staff including Principals and Deputy Principals need to continue to work from home or in designated school safety areas if they identify as high risk?
- All staff including Principals and Deputy Principals will be required to complete health questionnaires to assess high risk.
- Wellbeing webinars for all school staff including Principals and Deputy Principals to be held in advance of return to school.
- Need for time for staff training and planning for both in-school and remote and blended learning.

#### **4.1 Impact on children and parents.**

- Need to rebuild confidence in the school as a safe learning environment.
- Need for advance communication with students and parents/guardians on all new school policies and health and safety protocols.
- NEPS support and advice to students and parents around the anxiety about the return to school.
- Need for a systematic phased return with induction programme for first year intake designed in conjunction with NEPS guidelines.
- Need for students to complete health questionnaires to assess high risk and or COVID symptoms as a prerequisite to returning to school.
- Need to identify and plan for the safe continuity of education for students in the very high risk and high-risk categories.

#### **5.1 Impact on special needs education**

NAPD welcomes the initiatives recently agreed to put in place July Provision and to offer a post-primary programme to meet the additional needs of disadvantaged children and to reach out to those children who as a result of the pandemic are at a higher risk of dropping out of school. NAPD acknowledges the need to build confidence in the safety of the school as a caring learning environment.

#### **6.1 Advantages and disadvantages/challenges of potential staggered attendance.**

While preparing this submission, NAPD notes the proposal from the Minister that all students will return to school in September. This is a worthy aspiration because the idea of staggered attendance is not feasible and would pose too many logistical challenges some of whom are detailed below:

##### **Challenges**

- Broadband Connectivity
- ICT Funding
- Digital Devices/Students
- Digital Devices/Teachers

## **Calculated Grades in place of the Leaving Certificate**

### **6.2 Process around calculated grades**

When it became clear that the logistics of holding the Leaving Certificate towards the end of July could not be safely and uniformly implemented, the education partners sought to put in place a means whereby the Class of 2020 could move on to the world of work or to further or higher education. The process has generally gone smoothly. Teachers were given guidance on the fact that the percentage grade and class ranking were provided by the school and when the results were transferred to the DES, a process of standardisation would be undertaken to ensure that the grades issued to the Class of 2020 were valid in the context of the results from previous years. There is evidence that some teachers found the process stressful - best expressed by the statement that many teachers see themselves as advocates for rather than judges of their students. Comments from school leaders identified glitches in the system for example difficulties contacting hotline numbers, the portal crashing on occasions, difficulties in logging-on to the system and so on but most were resolved and it should be possible to complete the process by the deadline although some schools may need additional time because of difficulties with broadband and difficulty accessing the system for a few days at the start of the process.

### **6.3 Students taking non-curricular languages or subjects outside school**

Several questions arose in relation to students who were studying the non-curricular languages because they were native speakers and may have had exemptions from Irish and so needed to have a grade to matriculate for higher education. Other issues arose in relations to students who had sat the leaving cert previously but had applied to sit a single subject in school for example someone applying to study Irish to qualify for primary teaching. If the student was known to the school every effort was made to fill in a FORM C for the student rather than a FORM D on the basis that in the latter case it may not have been possible for the Department to award a calculated grade to the student

### **6.4 Impact on CAO system and third-level admissions**

The CAO will accept the Calculated Grades. If the calculated grades are issued in mid-August most candidates will be able to proceed to the world of work or on to further or higher education. In the event of some students deferring their place or as an exceptional measure if there are a large number of students who when they combine their calculated grade and a higher grade they achieved on sitting the leaving cert exam later in the year and as a result are entitled to a higher preference course this may cause pressure on places for the current fifth years as they seek to proceed to third level in 2021. NAPD welcomes moves to provide extra capacity at third level and notes the aspiration to increase funding for higher and further education in the programme for government.

### **Concluding statement**

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the committee. The situation regarding the opening of schools is still a topic of hot debate. NAPD has made detailed submissions to the High-level working group on School Re-Opening from the school leaders' perspective. The question of social distancing still must be resolved, and we await further guidance. Transport to school is a major issue. Supervision of students in school at post-primary level is a major issue. Additional supports will be needed to ensure compliance with the Return to Work Protocol. Schools are workplaces but each school is different, has a local context and will have individual challenges. NAPD made a positive contribution to the implementation of the Calculated Grades process. NAPD is proud of the way the education sector responded to this national emergency and is particularly proud of the role school

leaders played in enabling the scheme to be delivered successfully. Officers from the Association are available to expand further on points raised in our submission if required.

**References;**

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/06/11/6-ways-to-bring-students-and-staff.html?cmp=eml-enl-eu-news2-rm&M=59593831&U=3278973&UUID=75287b198b1527c7145156b2f9391d58>

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