

# Submission to the Covid 19 Committee on the Impact of Covid-19 on Education

22 June 2020



**The Children's Rights Alliance welcomes opportunity to make a written submission to the Covid 19 Committee on the impact of Covid 19 on issues related to education, specifically the re-opening of primary and secondary schools.**

The Children's Rights Alliance unites over 100 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services. We identify problems for children. We develop solutions. We educate and provide information on children's rights.

We would like to commend the Government and medical professionals for the swift action taken to flatten the curve of the Global pandemic. This is the greatest challenge our country has faced in recent times and we commend the work that has been done to protect the health and safety of the people of Ireland. As we move from emergency crisis planning towards living with Covid 19 for the foreseeable future, we need to consider the range of children's rights that are being impacted upon including the fundamental right of a child to access education.

**The Need for an Education Welfare Strategy**

Children have been out of school for 14 weeks so far and they are facing another 10 weeks minimum before the phased return of schools in September under the final phase of the Roadmap. The prospect of children being out of school from anywhere between six to eight months is likely to lead to a loss of learning, educational and developmental delays, school dropout, deterioration of behaviour and emotional regulation. These issues will be difficult to remedy. We would urge the reopening of schools and non-formal (youth services) education settings earlier than normal in August.

We welcome the Government's announcement that schools are due to return in their entirety in September because of the impact of school closures on children and young people. We also welcome this announcement as we are receiving consistent reports from member organisations about the stress in families particularly in lone parent and two parent/working households. Parents are struggling to carry out their own job and at the same time provide for the education of their children. Children have an absolute right to access education as provided for under the European Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular, Protocol 2. Of course, it will be necessary for special measures to be introduced in schools to minimise the infection and education stakeholders will have to be involved in working out those measures. We understand that other European countries have devised systems to enable children to attend formal/ non-formal education while at the same time protecting against the spread of Covid19 which we could adapt for the Irish education system.

In terms of dealing with the fallout from school closures including on children's learning loss, it is vital that consideration be given to preparing a new educational welfare strategy to address the likely disengagement and significant school drop-out that is likely to increase because of

circumstances linked to Covid19 such as lack of access to technology and challenges in the family environment.

### **Mental Health**

Children and young people are experiencing high levels of anxiety and poor mental health as a result of Covid19 and school closures. Poor emotional wellbeing is directly linked to poor outcomes in school. It is vital going forward that schools get to play a key role in developing children's wellbeing and mental health. An audit of psychological services in schools needs to be urgently carried out in order to ensure that there are sufficient services to cope with a surge in demand.

### **Assessment**

We recognise the difficulties with the holding of state exams and recommend that the consideration be given to speeding up the reform of the Leaving Certificate as a matter of urgency. The exam causes huge distress to young people. We strongly urge the Government to draw on and review the experiences of alternate methods of assessment used in this year's Leaving Certificate and prioritise reforming the Leaving Certificate.

### **Informal Education**

Youth work and informal education centres have a critical role to play going forward in addressing the needs of children and young people affected by the lockdown. In particular, those who have fallen behind in education, disengaged and who have developed anxiety and poor mental health. There is a need to invest in universal youth services now as a baseline in order to meet the needs of these young people. Additional investments could be made into targeted provision as is needed.

### **Food Poverty**

Food poverty has a serious impact on children's health, development and wellbeing. When children are hungry they can't learn, find it difficult to concentrate, feel unloved and don't grow. Following on from closures of schools, pre-schools and other vital facilities, it became apparent that many families were seriously struggling and children were going hungry. Since March, we have been engaged in extensive consultation with our membership who told us that some children are missing out on breakfast clubs and school lunches since lockdown began. Some younger children were no longer getting the daily meals that they would normally receive in their creche or pre-school. Job losses arising from the lockdown also reduced family incomes even further compounding the problem.

The Government extended the School Meals Programme during the lockdown as this was a very important measure. It is important that a review be carried out to capture any learnings from this approach. However, this programme has now ended due to the end of the school term. The Children's Rights Alliance is concerned that many children will continue to experience hunger and food poverty without an initiative to address holiday hunger. There are many providers out there

willing to help vulnerable families. Our national bodies such as Tusla have also played a critical role in addressing food poverty during the lockdown. A summer programme could also build on Tusla's work in this area. Government must take steps to ensure that no child goes hungry over the summer months.