

Ms. Aileen Fallon
Clerk to the Committee (Work Programme)
Special Committee on Covid-19 Response
Leinster House Dublin 2
D02 XR20

19th June 2020

Dear Aileen,

I refer to your request of 9th June 2020 for a brief written submission on issues related to education to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response.

I attach the submission of ASTI in that regard for the attention of the Special Committee

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kieran Christie', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Kieran Christie
General Secretary

ASTI Submission to Special Oireachtas Committee on COVID 19 Response

June 2020

Introduction

Planning for the return to school in a context of an evolving public health situation is a fraught and complex process. It is also a process of profound societal importance. The closure of schools has deepened society's appreciation of the role of schools as social institutions where young people learn as a community, make friends and are supported in their personal and social development by qualified and caring teachers. The planning process for the return to school cannot be reduced to a consideration of logistical challenges. The latter are significant but are only the first step. Lockdown has strongly impacted on young people's mental health and social wellbeing. Schools will be central to responding to this wellbeing challenge and how they are enabled to do so must be prioritised in the planning process.

Teacher wellbeing is equally critical. Teacher health and well-being is intrinsically linked to workload and lack of adequate resourcing. Well-being in school starts with teachers. They are in the front line of the work of schools and it is hard for them to promote emotional and social well-being of others if they feel uncared for and burnt out themselves. The importance of occupational health, safety, health and welfare at work was never more evident in all workplaces, including schools at this time.

"While changes to daily behaviour are crucial for the collective good, some people may become less vigilant and cooperative as the crisis lengthens. Schools can help counteract this by regularly reminding students and parents of social distancing measures, hygiene practices for schools and home and, if available, the value of vaccination. Children can act as messengers, raising awareness about safety and precautionary measures among relatives. Teachers also play an important role: Not only are they the providers of information, they also increase the legitimacy of child-delivered health messages as families are aware that the information." (OECD, 2020)

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

1) Ensuring the health and safety of students, teachers and other school personnel

The Board of Management has the duty of care to its students and staff. Each Board must conduct an extensive COVID 19 risk assessment of the entire physical infrastructure of the school and put a comprehensive COVID-19 response plan in place. Thus each school must

update their Safety Statement, their statutory obligation under the Safety, Health & Welfare at Work Act 2005. Hygiene and ventilation facilities will have to be upgraded; caretaking and cleaning routines reviewed; provision made for regular deep-cleaning; availability of PPE equipment for all staff, plastic barriers and sanitising equipment in line with public health advice. These extra requirements have substantial financial costs for schools, this will require additional resourcing. School capitation grants require to be reviewed to meet the additional costs of ensuring compliance with return to work safely protocols.

2) Adjusting the physical infrastructure to maintain social distancing

On the 9th June, when the Special Oireachtas Committee on COVID 19 wrote to ASTI seeking this submission, we were invited to make a contribution on the issue of how schools will operate under social distancing. The committee was not to know that the Minister would release a report on 12th June in which it is envisaged that no physical distancing would apply in classrooms. A key quote from that report states as follows:

“A differentiated approach to physical distancing in schools versus requirements for other parts of society or business could be considered appropriate and reasonable when the particular nature of the school environment is considered,” (DES, 2020).

That line implies a willingness on the part of the Minister for Education and Skills to operate an inferior social distancing regime in schools than that which will pertain in other parts of society. This would also lead to mixed messaging around the importance of social distancing in the community at large. Such an approach will be entirely unacceptable from an ASTI perspective.

It is our view that most schools will require significant re-ordering and refurbishment of classrooms to ensure adequate social distancing. In many instances, additional seating/desks/shelving will be required to create additional learning spaces. Schools will need to have high quality visual markers on all floor/ground surfaces to ensure social distancing. The summer grants scheme for remedial work must be supplemented to ensure that Boards of Management have access to funding to complete these works in the coming weeks.

3) Return to Work Safely protocol and compliance

The national Return to Work Safely protocol is the foundation for safe workplaces. The current DES stakeholder discussions on return to school are examining this protocol to

identify additional necessary measures when the workplace is shared with hundreds of young people. The Lead Worker Representative is a mandatory position under the protocol. The person who holds this role must have the confidence of both the staff and management. The role involves consulting with management around what is required under the protocol and on a daily basis to complete a specific checklist, to ensure compliance with the Covid-19 protective measures. There are time implications for carrying out this role and due consideration needs to be given to this. Training for the role is imperative, (Government of Ireland, 2020).

4) Vulnerable members of the school community

In every school there will be teachers and students who are vulnerable in terms of their health status or particular personal circumstances, including pregnancy. Agreed protocols must be in place in advance of the return to school for such situations. The former must also include procedures for actions to be taken should a person become unwell while in the school.

5) Initiative Overload and Inspection

Schools and teachers will have huge additional challenges in the academic year 2020/2021 to those that they address in the normal course of the school year. The key stakeholders in post primary education – staff and management - acknowledge the problem of initiative overload. There is an enormous added workload on management and teaching staff brought about by these many initiatives. Teaching through a blended approach, rigorous oversight of the physical environment in schools will add to the demands on teachers and school management, therefore it is important that the load caused by additional initiatives be paused for this year in order that the time and space be given to what school staff deem appropriate with their limited time and resources.

This will require a change in the approach of the inspectorate, with a more helpful, supportive role in post primary education over the coming year. Teaching and learning in this new educational environment is a sufficient challenge in itself for all concerned in the coming academic year. The inspectorate needs to be seen as a resource to support the teacher rather than someone evaluating teacher performance. This is a critical aspect for the new school year. There is a real opportunity to reframe the role of the inspectorate in post primary education, which would benefit students and teachers.

Impact on students, teaching and learning and challenges of potential staggered attendance

Again, the Special Oireachtas Committee on COVID 19 requested input on the advantages and disadvantages/challenges of potential staggered attendance. The Minister's report on 12th June appears to suggest that he does not envisage a necessity for such arrangements.

Notwithstanding that position, the ASTI remains of the view that such would be likely having regard to all the circumstances to date. In that context, we state the following:

1) Make equity the priority at national and school level

The closure of schools had highlighted the unequal nature of Irish society and the difficult home circumstances of many children, whether its food poverty, lack of physical safety, or access to play and green spaces. There is now abundant evidence on the extent of the 'digital divide' among students and the negative consequences this has for their access to remote teaching. This digital divide exists amongst teachers also. Schools should conduct an audit of both students and teachers' needs in relation to digital equipment, connectivity and other learning resources. The Department of Education and Skills must continue to provide additional funding to schools to support the purchase of the necessary equipment. It also needs to engage with other Departments to ensure that families have the capacity to pay for / have access to broadband and students have basic study equipment. Much good practice has already emerged on how schools are co-operating with local community services to meet the needs of disadvantaged families.

2) Students with special and additional educational needs

Students with special and additional educational needs have been particularly negatively impacted by school closure. Lack of one-to-one teaching, disconnection from peers and daily routines have resulted in set-backs to all developmental goals. Schools' response must be multi-focused and practical. The evaluation reports of provision for these students have consistently identified a number of areas which need to be addressed, including the deployment of additional teaching resources and training for classroom teachers. The need for a dedicated SEN Coordinator to lead the SEN team was a consistent theme. Schools must be facilitated to put these structures in place as part of the whole-school response to the return to schools of students with special and additional educational needs. SEN, students who are compromised due to existing health conditions pose a distinct challenge for education provision under the new regime and it is important that all concerned have realistic expectations of what can be provided.

3) Supporting students' wellbeing

The return to school this year will be like no other. Careful consideration needs to be given to how to support the wellbeing of students; identifying those who are in distress and delivering appropriate interventions. ASTI is extremely concerned that cutbacks to the guidance and counselling service will really impair schools' capacities to support students' wellbeing. The reduction in promotional posts in schools over the last decade has placed huge pressures on schools' pastoral structures.

Schools require a greater allocation of guidance and counselling hours within the school. Agencies such as NEPS, CAMHS must also be allocated the necessary resources to be available to schools in late-August.

These agencies and Tusla/EWS must be available to schools without the current long delays and waiting lists. A national plan for supporting young people's wellbeing must be developed as part of the overall return to school plan.

4) Teaching, learning and staggered attendance

ASTI research has indicated that the shift to remote teaching and learning has been difficult for many, if not most, students, (ASTI, 2020). As time went on, teachers noted increasing levels of disengagement, especially among disadvantaged students. This trend was attributed in part to the ICT difficulties and the home situation of students, many of whom had to care for siblings. However, the over-riding factor was the dwindling of students' morale and motivation in the absence of the social context of the classroom and the daily routines of school life. Teaching and learning are profoundly social experiences which depend on relationships rather than the transaction of content. While national guidance is necessary on staggered attendance, teachers and school leaders are best placed to make decisions on how it will operate at local level. Staggered attendance will invariably require the delivery of blended learning and schools will need guidance on how best to deliver a hybrid of classroom and remote teaching. (ASTI, 2020).

Protocols must be put in place around online teaching and learning prior to the commencement of the new school year. This will facilitate protection of both students and teachers. Any documentation around continuity of schooling must be developed through collaboration and agreed on by teacher unions and school management.

A key concern of the ASTI is the impact of the learning losses during school closure on teachers' capacity to deliver the curriculum in the next school year. Proposals to 'taper'

or reduce the curriculum are not feasible, not least because each teacher in each school has their own annual plan. Instead, the focus should be on reviewing the assessment arrangements for the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations. In particular, content and choice in examination papers can be adapted to provide the necessary flexibility to students. Such a measure would also dramatically reduce the pressure on students and teachers in examination years. Consideration must also be given to the role of ICT in enabling the holding of the State examinations in the context of future school closure.

5) Digital literacy skills

ASTI research has demonstrated that many students are struggling with remote learning in part because of poor digital literacy skills. Schools will need to address this skill gap as a priority. The education support services should ensure that age appropriate short courses/modules are available to teachers upon return to school, including CPD for teachers. Schools need to prioritise digital learning skills as part of their digital learning plan which schools have been required to develop since 2018.

Impact on teachers

1) Remote teaching

School closure and the shift to remote teaching has been as dramatic and challenging for teachers as it has been for their students. An immediate consequence has been an exponential increase in teacher workload driven by a number of factors including lack of dedicated education portals; incompatibility/lack of ICT devices; learning 'on the job'. Working from home has dissolved the normal work-life boundaries which, in a highly gendered profession, has been largely a negative experience. As underlined in a recent NERI report, little consideration appears to have been given to the misalignment between the reopening of economy and society whilst access to childcare remains so limited, (NERI, 2020).

Underlying this regressive situation are a complex of emotions arising from not being physically present in the classroom, missing their students, worrying about them and their wellbeing.

2) Blended learning

Staggered attendance and blended learning pose logistical and pedagogical challenges for teachers. On the positive side, it is clear from ASTI research that the teaching profession has significantly upskilled itself and this will serve to enable the development of viable and effective school responses. On the other hand, specific resource deficits need to be addressed. ASTI research confirmed that only 50% of teachers had been provided with a school laptop as a standard teaching resource. This is unacceptable. Teachers also need a dedicated portal for subject content, lesson plans and assessment instruments. Generic issues such as GDPR, privacy and the 'right to disconnect' need to be clarified for teachers in order to sustain their confidence in blended learning. An additional dedicated post of responsibility for leadership of their digital learning plan should be available in schools.

3) Teacher wellbeing

Long before the pandemic, teacher wellbeing was increasingly identified as problematic. Workload, innovation overload and a perception that their work was not valued by society have been repeatedly identified in the research in undermining the morale and wellbeing of the profession. Unequal pay structures remain deeply corrosive. ASTI research demonstrated that the three most important considerations in terms of the return to school were the centrality of health and safety, the need to address workload, and a focus on teacher wellbeing. The latter can no longer be dismissed as an occupational side product. If the pandemic has taught us anything it has to a collective acknowledgement of how important wellbeing is to individuals' resilience and self-efficacy. The same is true for teachers whose work is focused on the growth and flourishing of young people. Teachers are in the front line of the work of schools and it is hard for them to promote emotional and social wellbeing of others if they feel uncared for and burnt out themselves.

The issue of teacher health and well-being must not be a mere box ticking exercise, as it has been to date. A focus on teacher health and well-being must be addressed in a holistic and structured way and approached in a collaborative manner. This approach which is well recognised in international occupational health and workplace health promotion, is implemented in a number of countries including Finland. The Department of Health endorsed the importance and efficacy of a proactive approach to workplace health and well-being at their conference 2019 – Workplace Health Promotion – The Business Case. The Department of Education and Skills (2018) acknowledges the importance of teacher health in the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice document, the time to act on this is now.

Conclusion

Teachers are the frontline workers in the education system. Sudden school closure radically disrupted their working lives but within days, the shift to remote teaching was underway and with it, teachers' skills and innovative approaches ensured that students were continuing to receive instruction, guidance and support. With the return to school in late August, teachers will bring new approaches and insights which will be central to managing the ongoing disruption of normal school arising from the pandemic. However, society must ensure that schools are safe spaces for teachers and students: health, safety and welfare must be the priority of school management and the Department of Education and Skills. Addressing teacher workload and focusing on their wellbeing can no longer be sidetracked in education policy but must be underpin the overall policy response to the re-opening of schools. From whichever prism you view the practicalities of return to school, physical distancing, school organisation, curriculum demands, pastoral care involvement etc will require additional teaching posts.

ASTI, 2020. Teachers' experience of remote teaching.

Department of Education and Skills, 2018. Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice.

Department of Education and Skills, 2020. Planning for the reopening of schools in line with the Roadmap for reopening society and business. Report to Government.

Government of Ireland, 2020. Return to Work Safely Protocol. Prepared by DEBI and DOH.

NERI, 2020. Employment and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis.

OECD, 2020. Spotlight 21. CORONAVIRUS: BACK TO SCHOOL

Calculated Grades Submission:

The Leaving Certificate examination is one of enduring strengths of the Irish education system. It has high levels of societal trust, is transparent and fair and underpins internationally acknowledged high educational standards. However, in the context of public health advice and the need to bring certainty to teachers and students in relation to the examination, the ASTI engaged with the other education partners to develop an emergency Calculated Grades model. We did so in the knowledge that this could not possibly be regarded as a viable substitute for the normal Leaving Certificate examination in normal times. While ASTI members engaged with the process in good faith, given that the process is on-going and the outcome is unavailable it is not possible to provide any conclusions on the success or otherwise of the process. The primary concerns of the ASTI in this process was that (i) the process was as fair as possible, based on evidence of students' progress in learning and not open to bias or influence and (ii) to protect teachers' professional judgement. Specifically, one of our concerns was related to the potential

for teachers and school leaders to have to bear legal costs should civil proceedings be taken against them arising from discharge of their functions under the calculated grades model, notwithstanding that a state indemnity had been put in place. The ASTI subsequently secured full indemnity for ASTI members while they undertake this work in good faith. Crucially, the Department of Education and Skills has given an undertaking that in all cases where the indemnity applies, the Chief State Solicitors Office will take over the running of the litigation.

Non-school students:

One of the difficulties that emerged for schools in operating the process of providing Calculated Grades was with regard to students taking subjects on an extra mural basis. It emerged as a clear weak point in the process. There was some confusion as to who precisely was required or in the best position to provide the marks and whether external personnel were appropriately skilled or qualified to do so. School Principals reported unease regarding the sign off on grading material supplied by external personnel. ASTI is of the view that it was a mistake to allow persons who are not qualified or registered teachers to participate in the marking process.

Impact on CAO system and third-level admissions:

The impact of the application of the Calculated Grades model on the CAO system and third level admissions remains to be seen. ASTI has been assured that the process will align with the CAO system in accordance with the manner in which the normal Leaving Certificate does.