

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

---

## AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS, BREISOIDEACHAS AGUS ÁRDOIDEACHAS, TAIGHDE, NUÁLAÍOCHT AGUS EOLAÍOCHT

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

---

*Dé Máirt, 2 Márta 2021*

*Tuesday, 2 March 2021*

---

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1 p.m.

---

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Aisling Dolan,
Alan Farrell,	Eileen Flynn,
Carol Nolan,	Rónán Mullen,
Jim O'Callaghan,	Fiona O'Loughlin,
Pádraig O'Sullivan,	Pauline O'Reilly.
Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire,	
Aodhán Ó Ríordáin.	

Teachta/Deputy Paul Kehoe sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** The committee is meeting virtually through Microsoft Teams. We have received no apologies. Anyone present in the committee room is requested to use hand sanitiser. I remind members to ensure their mobile phones are switched off for the duration of this meeting as they interfere with broadcasting equipment and Teams even when on silent mode.

I again remind members of the constitutional requirements that they must be physically present within the confines of the place at which Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House or the convention centre in Dublin, to participate in public meetings. I will not permit a member to participate where they are not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts of either Leinster House or the convention centre will be asked to leave the meeting.

The draft minutes of the meeting on 23 February 2021 have been circulated. Are they agreed? Agreed.

### **Impact of Covid-19 on Reopening of Schools and State Examinations: Update**

**Chairman:** On behalf of the committee, I welcome the Minister for Education, Deputy Norma Foley, and the Minister of State at the Department of Education with responsibility for special education and inclusion, Deputy Josepha Madigan. The Minister and the Minister of State are here to update the committee on the safe and sustainable reopening of schools, plans for the 2021 junior certificate, leaving certificate and applied leaving certificate and the implementation of the key recommendations in the joint committee report, The Impact of Covid-19 on Primary and Secondary Education.

The format of the meeting is that both the Minister and the Minister of State will be invited to make an opening statement followed by questions from committee members. The committee will publish the opening statements on its website following the meeting. The Minister will have five minutes followed by the Minister of State who will have three minutes. The questioners will have six minutes per question, including the replies. I ask members to discontinue after six minutes.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House, or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. If their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks by the Chair. It is imperative that they comply with all such directions.

Before I call the Minister to make her opening statement, I note we have a number of officials present. I ask that they only respond to a technical point of information when necessary because this meeting is only of two hours' duration. I ask officials not to comment on Government policy as they are not witnesses before the committee. I call the Minister for five minutes followed by the Minister of State for three minutes.

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I thank the committee for its invitation to the Minister of State and I to be here today. As the Chair has outlined, I will share my time with the Minister of State. We are joined by a number of departmental officials. With me in

Kildare House are Mr. Dalton Tattan, Ms Aoife Conduit, Ms Yvonne Keating, Ms Anne Tansey and Mr. Neville Kenny while, remotely, Ms Deirdre Shanley, Ms Martina Mannion and Mr. Hubert Loftus are joining us from Athlone and Tullamore .

The committee in its invitation has set out an ambitious list of topics to discuss today, many of which have seen considerable developments in recent weeks. These include the return of students to in-person learning as well as arrangements for the State examinations in 2021. As Deputies and Senators know, yesterday saw the return of approximately 320,000 students to their classrooms, 60,000 of whom are the leaving certificate class of 2021, and approximately 260,000 in the first four years of primary school. This was a hugely positive day for many students, their families and school staff and one which has been much anticipated. Importantly, yesterday also saw special schools return to full in-class provision having operated on the basis of 50% attendance since 11 February. In addition, special classes at primary and post-primary level have been operating at full capacity since 22 February.

Over the next number of weeks, we hope to see even more students return to school, including 260,000 primary school students in the more senior classes on 15 March together with fifth year students at post-primary level. Subject to continued progress in maintaining reduced community transmission levels, the remaining post-primary students will return to school on 12 April following the traditional Easter break.

We have made progress over recent weeks in returning to classrooms. The phased approach, which has been building on the earlier phases when special schools and special classes reopened, has been possible with the progress made across communities in bringing the community transmission levels of Covid-19 down. We certainly need to maintain our efforts to contain the virus and I welcome the deputy chief medical officer, CMO's, advice to school communities and, more generally, that we must maintain our vigilance so that we can get all of our students back to in-school person provision.

Yesterday saw the return of the leaving certificate year students to their classrooms. They return with the clarity and choice that the recent Government decision on the approach to be taken to their leaving certificate examination provided. The work undertaken by the members of the advisory group on the State examinations in the lead-up to the Government decision was very beneficial in ensuring all voices could be heard and could input into the deliberations. The work in ensuring that students can choose to sit an examination, or avail of an accredited grade, continues intensively within my Department and the State Examinations Commission, SEC, and will involve continued engagement with the education partners.

Deputies and Senators will be aware that a document entitled, A Guide to State Examinations and Accredited Grades for Leaving Certificate 2021, was issued by my Department last week and it provides a useful outline to students, their families and schools as to how the examination process and the accredited grades process will work. There will be significant further information and guidance issued to students and schools over the coming weeks.

There are differences to the arrangements in 2021 when compared to last year. A full suite of examinations operated by the SEC will be run, starting with the oral and practical components in the coming weeks, subject to prevailing public health advice. The examinations will take place in line with their traditional June timetable and that timetable has been published. In addition, the accredited grades system this year will be ultimately completed by the SEC with my Department carrying out the preliminary stages of the work pending necessary legislative amendments. I intend to bring proposals for relevant legislative amendments to Cabinet shortly

and to seek to have the relevant provisions drafted as a priority. I will also seek the assistance of this committee in ensuring the relevant Bill can progress through the required legislative Stages as expeditiously as possible.

Across both Houses, I am sure we are united in the view that we want to see our leaving certificate class of 2021 progress to the next stage of their lives in as normal a fashion as possible, acknowledging the challenges that they and the education system as a whole have faced.

The third principal area that the committee had highlighted for discussion today was in its report, *The Impact of Covid-19 on Primary and Secondary Education*. I have read the report, including its recommendations, and to highlight the pace at which events have unfolded since the report was published in January, many of the recommendations in regard to the reopening of schools or the leaving certificate have been, or are being, addressed. We are also making progress in the other areas which the report focussed on and I am happy to provide any updates on the recommendations committee members may wish to discuss as we work through the session.

Finally, I acknowledge the work undertaken across school communities in recent weeks and particularly in the lead-up to yesterday in ensuring many students are now back in their classrooms with their teachers, special needs assistants, SNAs, and support staff. I look forward to seeing all students back in their classrooms over the coming weeks. I invite the Minister of State to address the committee.

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Is cúis áthais dom a bheith anseo inniu. Mar is eol dúinn, tá Seachtain na Gaeilge faoi lán seoil agus ba mhaith liom cúpla focal Gaeilge a úsáid ár dtús báire. Bímis bródúil as ár dteanga dhúchais agus úsáidimis í chomh minic agus is féidir.

We have seen the challenges faced by students, staff and families in recent weeks. I recognise the work of all these groups in dealing with the difficulties created by Covid-19. Our education system, as we know, is built on partnership and when everyone works together then all obstacles can be overcome. It is well established that remote learning is particularly challenging for students with additional needs and there is a risk of regression and loss of key skills. While additional supports can make a difference, nothing will replace the effectiveness of in-person, in-school education. It was for this reason the Government was determined that special education would be given priority in terms of support and school reopening.

Special schools were prioritised to reopen on 11 February on a 50% attendance basis. All special classes returned to in-school learning on a full-time basis from 22 February. Special schools returned to full-time in-school education yesterday, 1 March. It was a significant and welcome development which saw more than one third of primary schools and one quarter of post-primary schools open for children with special education needs in special classes, in advance of any return to mainstream education.

As part of the living with Covid-19 plan, NPHE has recommended a phased and cautious return to school over the coming weeks. Work will continue to ensure that all students with special education needs in mainstream school can return to the classroom. It is essential that as a society we continue to make progress in curbing the spread of the disease to allow all of our children to return to school as quickly as possible. The whole school community is working, including updated public health guidance and a framework document which outlines temporary time bound staffing arrangements, the application of substitution arrangements, time bound temporary arrangements for pupil attendance, information on school transport options, child-

care provision and other matters.

The Minister, Deputy Foley, all in government, our officials and I are aware the return to classrooms for students with additional needs and their families is much more than just a return to learning. We are aware that some families and school staff still have concerns about the return. All of the decisions made by Government over the past year have been about meeting the twin aims of protecting public health and delivering essential services such as education in the most appropriate way for all students. In politics, we may not always agree but I know all committee members are united in wanting to see our country emerge from Covid-19 restrictions successfully and as soon as possible.

In recognising that pupils with additional needs can find it harder to engage in remote learning, the Department has also put in place a supplementary support scheme to provide for some home based one-to-one support for such pupils. The supplementary programme for eligible pupils in third to sixth class will be extended by a further two weeks or an additional ten hours. Schools have been asked to prioritise deployment of their special education teaching, SET, resources to facilitate the engagement of pupils with special education needs, SEN, in third to sixth class. This will necessitate further collaboration between the special education teachers, SETs, and class teachers to establish current priority learning needs among those pupils.

I am determined to ensure an enhanced summer programme for children with special educational needs in summer 2021, as successfully happened last year. This programme provided a strong foundation to support students in advance of their return to in-school learning in September 2020 following the long summer break. It also allowed schools and staff to identify and address educational regression in students so as to make the transition back to school easier for these students and their families.

Since my appointment, we have successfully run that expanded summer provision programme, secured a record €2 billion budget for special education, opened a new special school, provided the resources for the creation of 1,200 additional special class places next year and worked to put special education first as part of school reopening. We know that challenges remain and I am determined to tackle these. As I said, I am happy to be here today to engage with the committee, to hear its perspectives on those issues and provide updates or further information where we can.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan. I would like to acknowledge everybody's effort in achieving a gradual return to school. It is fantastic for parents, students, teachers and boards of management. I say that to the Ministers and their officials as it is a great achievement.

I have received apologies from Deputy Ó Cathasaigh. Deputy Ó Laoghaire has six minutes for questions and replies.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Ar an gcéad dul síos, táim anseo i dTeach Laighean más gá é sin a rá. Ba mhaith liom cuidiú leis an méid atá ráite agat cé go bhfuil sé gairid an t-am atá agam. B'fhéidir go bhféadfainn níos mó a rá faoi seo amárach. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil le foirne scoile, tuismitheoirí, na leanaí féin agus na hAirí agus an Roinn ina measc as an obair chun na scoileanna a fháil ar ais. Tá go leor oibre le déanamh agus is maith an rud é agus is faoiseamh atá ann le haghaidh go leor teaghlach agus foirne scoile ar fud na tíre.

My first question is for the Minister, Deputy Foley. One of the key concerns for school

staff is that if a Covid-19 case arises, it be dealt with swiftly and decisively and that we rid the school of it as quickly as possible. Significantly scaling up testing and tracing is crucial to that. I refer to a specific element of that. I noted in an article in yesterday's *The Irish Times* that an expert group reporting to NPHET is likely to recommend the use of antigen testing in school settings, which would be complementary to PCR and not a substitute for it. Has the Department considered what role antigen testing can play in schools in making them as safe as possible? If NPHET recommends its use, on foot of the expert report, will antigen testing be used in schools?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Teachta as ucht an méid atá ráite aige ó thaobh na Roinne agus mhuintir na scoile. Déanaim tagairt do antigen testing. The Deputy is correct. We and public health have reviewed all the mitigation measures in operation in our schools in advance of the return to school. At present, antigen testing has not been recommended. The Deputy will be aware there are mixed views on antigen testing. However, I am conscious there is an expert group under the leadership of Professor Mark Ferguson of Science Foundation Ireland conducting-----

**Chairman:** I apologise for interrupting the Minister, Deputy Foley. I ask that she turns on her camera. The screen is blank at the moment. Perhaps there is a technical issue.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** Apologies, Chair.

Professor Ferguson of Science Foundation Ireland is heading up an expert group on antigen testing in a variety of settings and not just education ones. The report is due for completion sometime this month. Certainly, we will utilise antigen testing if NPHET recommends it. We have been flexible and resilient in terms of introducing in schools any measures requested from a public health point of view. We have introduced them at different stages throughout the re-opening of schools and we would do that going forward.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I have a question for the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, and a further question for the Minister, Deputy Foley. I ask that the Minister of State answers as briefly as possible. Parents of children with additional educational needs in mainstream feel they have been forgotten by the Department. At a previous meeting, I said that Sinn Féin wanted a phased return and special education should be the number one priority. That seemed to be the view of the Department, despite the difficulties. However, from the Minister of State's statement, and from what is happening, those children do not seem to be a priority. There does not seem to be any mention of priority for children with additional needs in secondary schools. Does the Minister of State think it is right that a student in first or second year with additional needs would have to wait until 12 April, almost six weeks from now, before they can get back into the classroom? There must be some way to get them in-school support in advance of that?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** Deputy Ó Laoghaire might be aware that approximately 1.5% of children internationally have special education needs, SEN. It is the same in Ireland. They are the children with the most complex needs. Approximately 8,500 children with special education needs, SEN, are in primary school and approximately 4,500 of those are back. Approximately 4,000 who are in third to sixth class are not yet back. As I said in my opening statement, special education teaching, SET, is prioritising the children in those years.

Other children with special education needs, SEN, with less complicated needs, are integrated into a mainstream class. Many of them are high impact, low incidence, such as dyslexia.

They were never envisaged as the first cohort, as a priority, as they are well integrated into mainstream. According to the Department and following agreement with education stakeholders, part of the rationale for that is that it is in the best interests of these children to come back as part of mainstream because they are so well integrated into mainstreams. There are approximately 10,000 children with SENs who will return to full classes in due course with all other students. The other rationale, of course, is the cautious phased approach that NPHET has recommended. It remains my absolute intention for all children with SENs to get back to school as soon as possible. We have the supplementary programme, which I have mentioned, to support these children in the interim and we have extended the supplementary programme for a further two weeks for children in third to sixth classes.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I am afraid I must interrupt the Minister of State in order to ask my final question. I do not agree with her. I understand the point she is making, but these children have additional needs and remote learning is very challenging for them. It is a pity that they have had to wait so long. Some of them have to wait for six weeks.

My final question is for the Minister, Deputy Foley. There are many issues still to be resolved with the leaving certificate. Clarity is needed on course work, mock examinations and music practicals. One thing I cannot understand is if students who decide to sit the exam are, for whatever reason, unable to do so, they will not get a second chance even though the availability of a paper B in the case of illness or bereavement has been built into the system for many years. I do not understand that decision. I refer to replies received to parliamentary questions. Is it the case that, for example, if Cork or Kildare goes into a localised county lockdown in June, all students in the affected county would lose the option of sitting a written exam? That seems to me to be removing the choice from students. If they follow public health advice in the context of having to self-isolate or a localised lockdown, they will not have the chance to sit the exams for which they prepared so hard. I ask the Minister to reconsider that decision. Can she confirm whether students will be given a second chance to sit the written exams in the case of a localised county level 5 lockdown?

**Chairman:** We are running out of time. I ask the Deputy to allow the Minister to briefly reply. If she has further information, she can send it to the committee secretariat and it will be forwarded to Deputy Ó Laoghaire.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** Deputy Ó Laoghaire is correct that clarity and choice was really what was offered to students on foot of the announcement by the Government in the not-too-distant past. On the issue of what is being provided for students, as we are currently in the midst of a pandemic, they were given the opportunity to choose the calculated grades process and, in addition, to sit the written exams in June with all that entails if they so wish. Those are the two options that are being provided for students. In the midst of a pandemic, it is a fair option. It allows students the opportunity to choose one or both and it makes provision from a public health point of view as well in terms of what may happen going forward.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister. The next speaker is Senator Dolan, to be followed by Senator O'Loughlin, who is taking the slot of Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan. Deputy O'Sullivan will attend the meeting at a later stage.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I welcome the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan. I particularly welcome the officials from Athlone, Tullamore and Dublin. Tá comhghairdeas tuillte ag gach duine because it is a significant achievement to have schools reopening again, particularly when we have got through such a difficult time in recent weeks

and months. We are here today to speak in particular about the reopening of schools and that being done in a safe and sustainable manner. It is great to see that special schools are reopening at full capacity this week and that junior infants, senior infants, first classes and second classes have come back at primary school level. A clear map has been provided. An outline has been issued whereby students will return to school on 8 March, 15 March, 29 March and 12 April, by which stage all students will have fully returned to school. That is a provisional schedule which depends on good public health guidelines being maintained and the numbers coming down. I am very happy to see that leaving certificate students will have the option to sit exams or get accredited grades.

I am very happy that the supplementary programme has been extended by ten hours. I welcome the commitment to the summer provision programme.

I spoke to the principals of several secondary schools last week. One of them in particular acknowledged the ease with which students returned to school and acknowledged the work that has been done by the Departments, the Minister, the Minister of State and their teams, in conjunction with principals and parents, to facilitate that.

Is there potential for first year students to take part in a one-week or two-week introduction to school programme during the summer? First year students have not had the opportunities that students would normally have in terms of exploring their schools. I know that several secondary schools are running such a programme at the moment. Perhaps that could be considered under the heading of inclusion. It would also be of assistance on the counselling side of things for first years coming into school.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister, Deputy Foley. Does she have any update for schools in respect of air monitors and meters? On leaving certificate reform, is there any update on the senior cycle review advisory report? We have a great opportunity to consider the review of the leaving certificate and, potentially, ways to use continuous assessment to better effect.

Finally, I was very fortunate to have an opportunity yesterday to raise the issue of a school in my local area. I represent Roscommon and Galway. I refer to the DEIS band 1 school in Ballinasloe, which does not meet the current requirements in terms of classroom space and size. The school is awaiting a new school building. Will school building projects be accelerated? If schools cannot currently maintain physical distancing, how are they going to go forward?

I thank our guests for their time and say “well done” to them on the roll-out to date.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Senator. In terms of air monitors and the whole question of ventilation and so on, significant guidance was issued to schools when they returned in September. Updated guidance was provided at the end of November or in early December. As I stated, there was significant review of all mitigation measures pertaining to schools in advance of the recent return to school. The advice under the current approved guidelines is that windows should be open before class and at the end of class and, at a minimum, during class. At very best, school staff should use their best experience. Having worked in classrooms, I am conscious that there is excellent expertise available within schools in that regard. However, I acknowledge that a high-level advisory expert group is looking at areas of ventilation not just within the school setting, but in other settings as well. It is due to make its findings known in the not-too-distant future. If there is a specific recommendation for any new or additional mitigation measures, then we will certainly adapt, as we always have, in the context of any new issues or new measures that we are asked to put in place.

On the senior cycle review, to the best of my information, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, is currently finalising its report. I look forward to the report insofar as it is likely to form the basis for further discussion, as well as, ultimately, for decision making. The Senator is correct that there is a new light shining on the senior cycle, given the current environment in which we are living. I await that report.

On the specific issue she raised of a DEIS band 1 school in her constituency and the schools building programme, we are progressing apace with the school building programme. Even in the midst of the pandemic, we are looking forward to the completion of more than 200 building projects this year. We anticipate the commencement of at least 145 projects in June or July. We are continuing apace with what is a very important programme within the Department. The building programme is required to meet the needs of school communities.

**Chairman:** The Senator has 30 seconds left because I interrupted.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I might bring in the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan. I have a query on a programme that might potentially be one for the summertime.

I have one final comment on the Central Applications Office system. We are putting in programmes to support students who are applying to the CAO. Engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will be crucial, especially if we are going to look at spaces. I understand there has been an increase of over 6,700 applications in the CAO programme this year.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** The Senator asked about the summer provision. Approximately 14,000 took up summer provision last summer. It was expanded to Down's syndrome children, post primary and preschool. Work is ongoing for this summer and we are looking to expand it further. I am working with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, on the other matter.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** I appreciate the opportunity to engage with the Minister and Minister of State and thank them for being here. I will break my contribution in two pieces. One is for the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and the other for the Minister of State at the Department of Education, Deputy Madigan.

I thank the Minister for giving clarity on the choice to leaving certificate students. It is something we all sought and spoke about within the committee confines. We sent a request to the Minister indicating that was what was needed. The outcome is much appreciated, taking on board the views of everyone involved within the education world. It is certainly the best possible solution.

I am glad that the roadmap to schools fully reopening has started. I have a slight concern for those between first and third years in secondary school because it is still over a month before they will have the opportunity to return to school. Will the Minister look at those who cannot sit the junior certificate this year and who will be going into a transition year programme? I think the transition year programme will need to be looked at for the next school year in terms of a little catch-up with the world of academia. The Minister might comment on that.

I have some concern for those children who come from more vulnerable backgrounds. We need to support them in transitioning back into school. I know in some cases they have not really transitioned from September to Christmas. I know the Minister is looking at advancing DEIS supports and the school completion programme, which is important work. I am glad that

has come back to the Department of Education. The Minister might comment on that.

The committee is examining the issue of school bullying and the impact on mental health. Does the Minister have comments on that? That comes back to mental health supports for students, especially for those coming back into school having had difficult experiences because of bereavement through Covid-19 or having had to mind siblings when parents were working, etc.

My last point relates to the schools building programme. I am delighted to see so much progress. I am glad one of the schools to benefit will be St. Paul's Secondary School in Monasterevin. As the Minister knows, I always take the opportunity to ask about the new build that is badly needed at secondary level in the Newbridge and Kildare areas. They are the particular points I wish to raise. The Minister said there would be a review of the school transport scheme. Any update on that from the Minister would be welcome.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** In the first instance, I will address the question on students from first year to third year. In the broader mix, and with the best will in the world, I would love to have all students back in one go, but that is not possible in the current circumstances living with Covid-19. The recommendation based on the expert advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team is that we would take what the deputy chief medical officer has called a cautious and phased approach to reopening our schools. For this reason, we are limited to the manner in which we have reopened the schools. We are hopeful that community transmission can be kept under control. I acknowledge that there is a burden of responsibility on all of us within the community to ensure we progress positively. If we continue to progress positively, we will see the successful reopening on the other dates, including 15 March and 12 April, respectively.

The Senator referenced the transition year programme. I acknowledge that reconfigured or new guidelines issued this year for the transition year programme and how it could operate in our schools. We will be cognisant of the need to look at specific programmes like that. We will be cognisant of the need for measures to make time for learning that has been lost. All of that will come in due course.

I was asked about DEIS supports and supports for children with particular challenges in that respect. I am conscious of that and of the importance of supporting children who experience disadvantage. A total of 887 schools are in the DEIS programme and they cater to more than 185,000 students. Committee members may be aware that we made an announcement on the 1-point reduction in class size in urban DEIS band 1 primary schools. Reference was made to the school completion programme. We have looked at introducing measures whereby we can now extend the school completion programme to include 14 urban primary and 14 post-primary DEIS schools. There is also a 5% increase in funding for school completion programmes.

From the point of view of educational disadvantage, we have introduced a measure to reduce enrolment in DEIS post-primary schools from 700 to 600. This would allow for qualification for an additional deputy principal within those schools.

Tied up with that is the reference made to well-being, which is highly important in the education sector. We have a strong well-being policy in the Department. In our most recent budget we made funding available for an additional 110 guidance counsellors and 17 additional National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, psychologists. I confirm that NEPS is continuing to work on a parallel basis with schools. In addition to its online work, on-site visits have commenced as well. We are conscious that in the context of well-being at the start of the year a strong emphasis was placed on the return to school and how it would affect the well-

being of students as they returned. That continues as students return. Throughout the entire school year, there is a strong focus on well-being from that point of view.

**Chairman:** I ask the Minister to conclude because we have gone well over seven and a half minutes.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** My thanks to the Cathaoirleach, the Minister and the Minister of State for joining us again today.

I congratulate all school staff and all those across all schools on ensuring we can have safe reopening of schools and giving some clarity around the leaving certificate.

I am keen to mention the Irish Second-Level Students Union, ISSU, and the amount of work those involved have undertaken. It is welcome that we have choice available now. I know it has not been easy so it is important for all of us to recognise the amount of work that has gone into that. Obviously, there are still questions outstanding in respect of out-of-school learners. I know that is something the ISSU would like to have clarity around. Some students may be unable to sit an examination because of the pandemic. What is the impact on them? Others do not have access to continuous assessment. The Minister might outline if she knows at this stage what will happen in that respect. Obviously, they need to make sure that they have a qualification at the end.

Those who might leave school after the junior certificate traditionally tended to go into apprenticeships. If the junior certificate will not go ahead, what facilities are being put in place to ensure that those students meet the criteria for these apprenticeship programmes that previously would have required the student to attain certain levels of grades in order to progress to other programmes?

I congratulate the Minister, Deputy Foley, on her recent announcement about DEIS urban band 1 schools. I, along with every committee member, made representations for that class size reduction in primary, secondary and vertical schools. The move is very welcome. While my constituency might not have DEIS urban band 1 schools, there is still an amount of disadvantage there. We are going to potentially see an expanding divide. As Senator O'Loughlin outlined, those children from first year to third and fourth year will have been out of school for a significant amount of time. There are children with disadvantage across all schools. Will we be looking at increasing home school liaison, for instance, in order to make sure that over the coming years that the disadvantage these children may be feeling now does not become a problem as they approach the junior and leaving certificates?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I endorse the Senator's remarks about ISSU, the Irish Second-Level Students Union. It continues to be a positive contributor to the advisory group. I acknowledge the role of students, as well as all the partners in education, who sat around the table and gave many long hours and days. They gave so much of their own time, whether they were representatives of parents, teachers, students, managerial bodies or SNAs.

There will certainly be an accommodation for out-of-school learners. A process is being developed with regards to giving access to them to the absolutely maximum extent possible. That was an issue last year but we are most determined that measures will be put in place to accommodate them.

Unfortunately, due to the fact that exams would have to be run in parallel, from a public health point of view, it would not have been possible to run both junior certificate and leaving

certificate exams at the one time. What will prevail this year will be exactly the same as last year. Students will receive a certification of completion from the Department. There will also be assessments run in the schools prior to that.

We will also be fixing our attention on how adult learners and early school-leavers could be accommodated later in the school year, should they wish to avail of an examination. That would be for later in the year, however.

I am conscious of the points raised by the Senator on DEIS. The Department is intent on putting particular emphasis on DEIS, notwithstanding the announcement we made yesterday on the pupil-teacher ratio, school completion programmes and staffing in DEIS schools. On the point of time lost, it is also my intention that we would, like last year, have an enhanced summer programme for numeracy and literacy. I am looking very much to doing that this summer. It is an area in which we will continue to work and focus on in the Department. We will look at all measures, including the Senator's point about home school liaison officers, that might need to be incorporated going forward.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** I thank the Ministers and the civil servants for attending the meeting.

The Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, said schools have been asked to prioritise deployment of their special education teacher resources to facilitate engagement of pupils in third to sixth classes. Does that mean there might be negative consequences for those children with special needs who are back at school? When she says "prioritise", does she mean that there will be a lessening of the availability of special education teaching resources to those children from junior infants to second class who are actually back at school?

The Minister, Deputy Foley, referred to the fact that legislation will be needed to achieve the accredited grade systems completion by the State Examinations Commission. What exactly is it that requires legislative change? While I understand the Minister's desire to have it all put through as expeditiously as possible, there is frustration in the Oireachtas about the lack of time made available to the Dáil and Seanad to properly scrutinise legislation. Will she guarantee that this legislation will be before the Oireachtas in time for us to have proper debate and scrutiny, not all Stages in one day and that kind of thing which does not inspire confidence in the political system?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** There will not be any neglect of other children with special needs who are back in school. Obviously, we have to trust schools to best manage their special educational teaching resources. In the budget, we got 235 extra new teachers for special classes, 23 special school teachers and 145 special education teachers. There are now 18,000 special needs assistants. There are enough resources there for the schools to be able to manage and prioritise those children from third to sixth class who are not yet back in school, as well as looking after the children with special needs who are back in school.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** On the examinations legislation, last year the calculated grade process was run by the calculated grades office. This year it is our intention that the calculated grades process will be overseen by the State Examinations Commission and, henceforth, it would be known as the State Examinations Commission accredited grade. To make that possible, it is necessary for legislation to provide that oversight from the commission. The legislation will also deal with other issues like, for example, a provision for teacher indemnity. It will include provisions to prohibit the canvassing of teachers during their work with the accredited

grades process. It will not be problematic legislation. The Senator would be more expert on that but it is really just to tie up these specific issues.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Are there any key differences in the guidelines or guidance being given this year on State examinations and accredited grades for leaving certificate 2021 and those given last year? I know there is a difference in the process in that the State Examinations Commission will be finalising the grades. We are using a system this year that will give students the option of taking whichever is the best between their accredited grades and leaving certificate grades in any given subject. Is it reasonable to believe that the accredited grades will be lower than the leaving certificate grades in reality? Will this system reassure students and inspire in them confidence in the quality of their eventual grading? Giving students the best of both worlds sounds good, but will people have confidence in leaving certificate qualifications if accredited grades can trump them?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The process will be different, in that two options are being provided for - the accredited grades system and the written examinations in June or whenever. The Senator is correct, in that students will have the opportunity to avail of one or both. A slight difference from last year is that the portal that students use to opt into the calculated grades process will open much earlier this year during the week of 8 March, thereby affording them the opportunity to choose one or both processes. There will be another opportunity in April, at a date yet to be confirmed, to revise their choices if they so wish.

It is my preference and determination to encourage as many students as possible to take the written examinations in June. By having the chance to avail of both options, they will be able to make the best of their opportunities and situations. That will be a positive step forward. Given that we are in a pandemic, it is only right and proper that students be afforded the choice.

There is no valuing of one process over the other. When they receive their leaving certificate results, there will be just one set of results and it will not stipulate whether they came from calculated grades or written examinations. They will be of equal measure, which is only right and fair, given that these provisions are being made in acknowledgement of the loss of in-person learning of five months last year and two months this year. The two processes carry equal weight.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire agus leis an Aire Stáit as a bheith linn um thráthnóna. Tá mé in ann a chinntiú go bhfuil mé i dTeach Laighin.

I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for some of the recent announcements of measures that we have been calling for and they have now delivered. We had a long discussion about passing the pupil-teacher ratio reduction on to DEIS schools. That was announced. We asked that the Minister waive the leaving certificate fee. That has been done. We asked that school profiling not form part of this year's calculated grading system. The Minister has ensured that. We also asked that she provide guidance for second level schools in advance of their return in order to deal with the issue of mock examinations. That has been done as well. It is only fair to put on the record the Minister's delivery of measures that were called for.

The students returning to school have lost out on in-class teaching. It is important to emphasise the phrase "in-class teaching", given that teaching has been ongoing, albeit remotely, which has its own difficulties. Will the Minister speak about the Department's analysis of the effects of this loss on children? What scientific research has the Department undertaken to ascertain what damage has been done to children by not having in-class learning? As a result

of that analysis, what supports does the Department believe need to be put in place? I do not necessarily want to talk about a feeling the Department has. Rather, I want to hear about actual analysis that has been undertaken.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I appreciate the Deputy's opening remarks. I also appreciate his commentary on in-school and remote teaching and learning. It is important to acknowledge that remote teaching and learning have been ongoing while it has not been possible for all students to attend school in person, notwithstanding the fact that it is the best experience for all concerned that this teaching and learning be done in schools in person.

Regarding the monitoring of how students have experienced the loss of in-person learning, we have direct evidence showing that the provision of remote teaching and learning has been more successful on this occasion than previously. Significant guidance was made available in advance and considerable work was done in schools to prepare. While all of that was positive, I recognise the Deputy's points. My Department's inspectorate has monitored educational provision by schools in both the remote and on-site schooling contexts. The research carried out by the inspectorate has captured a range of perspectives, including those of principals, teachers, parents and students, on how schools have operated, the teaching and learning being done, pupils' experience of school and their engagement with learning and so on. The research includes surveys of different stakeholders, discussions with school principals and inspectors meeting a variety of student and parent focus groups. A number of reports on the research have been published on the Department's website and more publications on foot of further research are expected in the near future.

We are conscious that we are still in a learning process in terms of how students have fared in the current circumstances. As a consequence of that, we will put suitable measures in place accordingly.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Research has been undertaken and there is an acknowledgement within the Department that damage was done to children through unavoidable school closures. In the UK, there is a £1 billion catch-up fund for children and young people. Is it the Minister's intention to advocate for a fund that would do some of the work to help children who have been damaged - I use that word, but another term would be "negatively affected" - by the lack of in-class teaching to catch up? Can we expect a catch-up fund from the Department to finance the repair of the damage that has been indicated by its reviews?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I am conscious of the entire gamut of education, but particularly existing areas of educational disadvantage. As the Deputy alluded to, we made significant announcements yesterday about supporting and improving the situation in DEIS schools. It is my intention to offer an expanded provision of summer schemes in numeracy and literacy to benefit students who feel that they have been negatively impacted. I recognise the specific point made by the Deputy in terms of the funding that has been made available in Britain. There are a variety of views as to how that has been received in Britain by education stakeholders. It is, therefore, important that we find our own mechanisms going forward. In the first instance, however, it is most definitely my intention to begin programmes of that nature in the summer, particularly with regard to numeracy and literacy, but much more expanded than we had last year. Other measures that are required will be put in place on foot of the studies we have done and those which are ongoing.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister. The Deputy's time has concluded. At seven and a half minutes I have been very lenient but I will allow him to come back in if we have time. Deputy

Farrell will be followed by Deputy Conway-Walsh.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for their opening statements and answers to the questions already posed. I believe it was said in the opening remarks that education is built on partnership. While, of course, I welcome and acknowledge the work the Minister and the Minister of State have done on their stated plans since the beginning of January, it would be inappropriate of us not to make a general comment as regards what occurred over the last number of weeks. The statement that education is built upon partnership is somewhat in tatters at this point. Does the Minister, Deputy Foley, in particular, acknowledge that is a common perception held in the public domain, particularly among parents and parents of children with additional educational needs.

I want to follow what Deputy Ó Ríordáin had to say in his very appropriate questions about departmental research on the long-term effects of students not being in the classroom, particularly those at an educational disadvantage or who have additional needs. In the coming months and years, we as a legislative body and a committee must place a priority on and invest in the need to build up resilience in those student numbers to assess properly, in the first instance, as Deputy Ó Ríordáin said, the long-term or medium-term affects, but also the additional supports in which I feel we must now invest within the education sphere to try to catch up. Could the Minister please make a general response to that?

I then have a number of specific questions for the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I am not 100% clear as to what point the Deputy is endeavouring to make in his opening remarks insofar as everything that has been achieved from the beginning of my Ministry on 27 June 2020 through, for example, the reopening of schools right up to this current point, including the leaving certificate last year and this current process, has most definitely been facilitated in a partnership approach.

While there may well be disagreements and different views around the table of partnership and education, I imagine one would find that in any sphere. I am frank and honest enough to concede that when a wide variety of stakeholders, which includes parent, student and teacher voices, representatives of special needs assistants, SNAs, and managerial bodies are around the table, one will have a variety of different and competing views and experiences. That is as it should be. At the end of the day, however, it is the job of the Government and the Minister to listen to all those views and work through them, learn from those experiences and, ultimately, make a decision.

I want to put on the record, as I have at every possible opportunity, my acknowledgement of the long-term consistent and generous engagement of all the partners in education over what has been a difficult and trying time for all of society, and all the different sectors within society, not least education. I am, therefore, unequivocal in my acknowledgement of the positive input of the partners in education in regard to what we have achieved.

Regarding disadvantaged-----

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I am sorry to interrupt the Minister but to be fair, a leaving certificate student at the moment hearing this later might disagree. I appreciate the Minister's response, however.

I want to focus on this as my time is limited. I am sure there will be an opportunity to come back to it later. However, my question-----

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I am sorry, the Deputy made a point. I am not clear as to what the point is. Perhaps he would like to elaborate on it rather than making a broad statement.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** The point is obvious. There was a proposal by the Minister and the Department of Education for students to return to the classroom. They did not; it is now March and they are only just returning. I am not having a go at the Minister by any means. I am suggesting the statement that education is built on partnership, which I believe was spoken by the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, really does not ring true. The partnership did not allow for the return of students to classrooms at an appropriate time, particularly for our exam year students. That is notwithstanding any other difficulties, particularly with regard to children with additional educational needs.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** On the contrary, to be fair, the education sector was stood down, not because of something within the sector itself but because of the mobility issues as highlighted by the national public health emergency team, NPHET. The approach had to be taken because of that. However, it was also clearly outlined by NPHET that accommodation could be made for certain sectors. That has taken some time. As I said, there are a variety of views around the table but we move forward positively.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I thank the Minister. I want to ask the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, about that very important point made by Deputy Ó Ríordáin before me on the research required to determine the effects of long-term absence from classrooms for children with additional needs. When does the Minister of State expect that such a report will be provided to her? When might it be provided to us as a committee so we can try to assist her in implementing it?

I acknowledge the €2 billion in additional budget that has been provided to the Department. Of course, I really believe that we should have our special education teachers back in the classroom at the moment. While only half of the students have returned, I accept that has presented profound difficulty for students and parents. I cannot help but feel, however, there are, perhaps, at this moment, unknown problems which will no doubt manifest themselves very soon within the education sector. Does the Minister of State have a comment on that?

I have one final point to make.

**Chairman:** The Deputy has gone way over his time. Can we get a brief comment from the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan? We will then go back to Deputy Farrell for ten seconds.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I appreciate what the Deputy is saying. Obviously, children with special needs were always a concern for the Government. That is why special schools originally went back on 11 February to 50% capacity. They are now, thankfully, at 100% capacity since Monday. Special classes have been back since 22 February and, as the Deputy knows, so too have junior infants up to second class. There are children with special educational needs, SENs, within those classrooms, but obviously, everybody is not back.

Progress reports are given at the summer provision, which we are expanding this year. There were 24,000 children eligible for it last year and 14,000 took a place. We extended and expanded it to Down's syndrome, post-primary and preschool children, and hope to expand it further this year. That will help in terms of regression. Those progress reports will be given to the schoolteachers in September when those children go back. It is really important that we try to do everything we can to support them.

**Chairman:** I will have to let Deputy Farrell in at the very end because we have gone way

over time on his question. It is unfair to the rest of the members. I want to give everyone the same number of minutes. Deputy Conway-Walsh will be followed by Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for their statements today. The first thing I want to look at is safety within the schools. Perhaps the Minister could clarify something for me on the 40% reduction in personal protective equipment, PPE, that was talked about earlier in the year. Has that now been addressed? Is that 40% cut not going to happen? I will ask each question separately, if that is okay.

**Chairman:** That is perfect.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I wish to clarify that there was never, at any stage, a question of a 40% cut in PPE. The PPE provision for schools is to be provided in three tranches. The first tranche was from last September to Christmas and the second tranche began in January. Obviously, there were additional costs in September for particular provisions that had to be purchased, be it hand sanitiser or extra equipment in schools ranging from something as small as additional bins to whatever might be needed, so additional funding was made available there. Those start-up costs were not necessary in the second tranche starting in January and that is the reason there was a reduction in funding. Point for point, however, the funding is the same. There was never a question of a 40% reduction. It was just an acknowledgement that the start-up costs, as it were, incurred in September would not be incurred in January in the second term. All the moneys that need to be provided for PPE are most certainly currently being provided and will be provided as part of the third tranche also.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** That is good. No school will be without any PPE it requests.

With regard to testing and tracing, will there be serial testing for all school staff this time? What improvements have been made in the school tracing since last year to ensure we can keep any outbreak that occurs contained?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy for raising this question. I mentioned earlier that all the processes and measures we have in place were reviewed by public health officials prior to the return to school. Regarding the specific measures in place should an incident arise in a school, we have enhanced school teams, with public health being supported by personnel from the Department of Education. There is also a facility whereby any testing that takes place in school will be fast-checked or “red-batched”, as it is called, so it gets priority testing. There is also a seven day per week helpline available to all principals to support them if any incidents occur in a school. There is significant support in schools should any incident occur there.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** That is good. If somebody has a test, will the result be back within 24 hours?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** It is our experience that the tests are to be “red-batched”, to quote the phrase that is used. It ensures priority testing so the result will be back expeditiously.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Part of the problem we had the last time, as the Minister will recognise, is the interface between the Department of Education and the HSE and where the accountability lay in terms of information and the actions that needed to be taken. I welcome the fact that this is to be improved. Will staff who are performing intimate caring roles be given medical-grade masks now?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I wish to make a point of clarification relating to decisions being made and so forth. The public health decisions will still be made by public health officials. That is where the expertise lies. I wish to be clear and upfront about that. Public health will be supported by staff from the Department of Education but all public health decisions relating to what happens in a school and how a situation in a school is managed will be made by public health officials.

As part of our new procedures medical-grade masks are being made available to all teachers and SNAs in special schools and classes and to SNAs in school settings, as well as anybody who is not in a position to maintain the 2 m distancing.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Okay. It has been said, and I believe it, that there is an inequality with regard to the mainstream schools with young people who have special educational needs. I see it even in my constituency in terms of one school being able to meet the needs of students with special educational needs while another is not. It is very confusing for parents. They feel a sense of injustice and inequality in that regard. The Minister spoke about 20,000 students and when we have brought back so many other students, they find that difficult to accept.

However, I am constrained in the amount of time I have, so I wish to ask a question about the leaving certificate. The Department's document, A Guide to State Examinations and Accredited Grades, lays out in detail how teachers should arrive at the grade, but there is much less detail on how the grades will be standardised other than to state that they will be adjusted based on the class performance in the junior certificate. Will anything else be used to change the grades issued by teachers?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** As I outlined earlier, the calculated grades process or the accredited grades process, as it will be this year, will be overseen by the State Examinations Commission. There is currently a tender process for a contractor. The issues the Deputy referred to will be worked out with the SEC, but it is likely we are looking at, similar to the junior certificate, achievement for the cohort of 2021, similar to last year, the achievement of leaving certificate over the past four years, subject by subject, and the teacher's estimated grade. However, the finer detail of that will be worked out by the SEC.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Hopefully, it will be sooner rather than later.

**Chairman:** You have gone over time, Deputy. I have a good timer here, so I will have to allow you to contribute at the end if there is time and it is possible. The next speaker is Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan, followed by Deputy Nolan.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** Táim anseo i dTeach Laighean. I welcome the Minister and the Minister of State. I realise that the times have been tough for both of them, but with the return to schools and the leaving certificate situation being resolved there is much to be grateful for. I thank both of them for the work they have done.

The Minister and Minister of State will have received the joint committee report on the impact of Covid-19 in primary and post-primary schools. I have a question for the Minister relating to hot school meals. I have spoken about this in the past. I was a teacher like her and we acknowledge that disadvantage is in all towns and communities and in most, if not all, schools. I welcome the fact that the hot meals programme and the funding for it were maintained throughout the crisis, as well as the work many schools did in providing food parcels to

students who were in need. Is it the intention of the Department to expand that programme in the future? I believe there is merit in expanding it whereby it would be available to all students in all schools. Will the Minister make a quick comment on that?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** That programme is run out of the office of the Minister for Social Protection. As part of budget 2019, there was a pilot scheme which began from September 2019 to provide hot meals-----

**Chairman:** Minister, could you turn your camera on?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thought it was on.

**Chairman:** We cannot see you. There is a blank screen.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** Can you see me now?

**Chairman:** Yes, that is perfect.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** My apologies. The pilot scheme in 2019 benefited approximately 6,700 students at a cost of €2.5 million. A further €5.5 million was made available in the last budget. That means the students who heretofore were availing of the cold lunch option are now in a position to avail of the hot lunch option. This is a very important scheme and I appreciate the Deputy raising it. I am working closely with the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, in rolling out that capacity as far possible. I acknowledge her role and work on this issue, as it falls within her remit.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I hope capacity can be expanded in future through the work undertaken by both Departments. The Minister also instigated a review of school transport and that is welcome. There may have been some initial delay because of Covid-19, but I understand that the terms of reference for the review have been established. I would like an update on the status of and progress being made on that endeavour. I hope it will be in place for next year's intake of students.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The Deputy is correct that the review group has met. The technical group is working on specific issues in the programme for Government, such as those pertaining to the school of closest proximity, for example, as well as other aspects. It is my hope and expectation that we will have an interim report in the short term and there will be scope to conduct a more in-depth report later. I am mindful, however, of the need to progress this issue as expeditiously as possible. All things being equal, and it will be appreciated that Covid-19 has not helped, we are doing everything we can to achieve the target of having an interim report in the short term. That is my objective.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** That is welcome. I will address my next questions to the Minister of State. Comments have been made about the full resumption of schooling for people with special needs and those with an ASD diagnosis. I reiterate those comments. All of us on this call acknowledge that remote learning is no substitute for on-site learning or in-class teaching. Several speakers have said that and I add my voice to theirs. The April date must be considered for children with an ASD diagnosis or special educational needs.

My final question concerns a site for a new special school in Cork. I have raised this issue several times with the Minister of State. I understand a meeting took place last week, but I am not sure who met the Minister of State and her officials. What was the outcome of that meet-

ing? Has anybody in the Department contacted the Cope Foundation regarding the next stage of this process? I understand representatives of the Cope Foundation have twice written to the Department to try to progress the case for a new special needs school in Cork, but I am not sure if they have received any response yet. If she can, will the Minister of State clarify if that meeting took place? Have any efforts been made to communicate with the Cope Foundation in the interim to update it on where we stand regarding this project?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I have spoken to Deputy O’Sullivan about this issue before. He is aware that several meetings took place last autumn between the Department, the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, the school management and the Cope Foundation, which is a patron of Scoil Aislínn special school located on the Boreenmanna Road in Ballintemple, Cork. Those meetings explored the possibility of expanding Scoil Aislínn special school, as well as other options, including the suitability of using Montenotte House as a location to facilitate, hopefully, the enrolment of children without a school placement. A meeting with the Cope Foundation was due to be held in February and I will get details on that for the Deputy. It is important that we try to work with an existing school regarding school places. The NCSE is aware of about 20 children who are not in school, require special school places and are now availing of the home tuition scheme. I will send details of the meeting in February to the Deputy.

**Chairman:** I see that Mr. Loftus is on the call. As he is in charge of the buildings unit, he might be able to contribute some more information regarding Deputy O’Sullivan’s question.

**Mr. Hubert Loftus:** Significant work is being done in the background to find accommodation solutions in Cork, where there is a particular priority. We can arrange for a specific update on that to be sent to the Deputy. We are also looking at the broader picture.

**Chairman:** Deputy O’Sullivan has about 20 seconds left, so I will grant him some leniency.

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** I appreciate that. I am aware that short-term and long-term solutions are being explored. As the Minister of State acknowledged, though, about 20 children will potentially be getting home tuition in September. Everything must be done to investigate possible short-term solutions to allow those children to get in-school teaching. Medium and long-term options are great as well, if they exist and involve a greenfield site or the conversion of a building, but we must emphasise the provision of a short-term solution to this case. I look forward to the update.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Ar an gcéad dul síos, gabhaim buíochas leis na hAíre agus cuirim fáilte roimh an gcinneadh a rinne an Roinn Oideachais chun na scoileanna a athoscailt an tseachtain seo. Those movements were welcomed by all.

I welcome the certainty the recent decision on the leaving certificate has given to the 60,000 leaving certificate students impacted by the pandemic, school closures and the lack of in-class tuition. Three different choices are being offered to those students, and I anticipate that will cause some organisational and management difficulties in our schools. Has the Department looked at the possibility of recruiting extra teachers temporarily to ensure our students have the optimum benefit in this regard? I say that because many of these students have been adversely impacted. They missed five months of in-class teaching last year and then two months of this academic year. Some level of support must be provided to these students. Has any planning been done in this area?

This development will also create problems by overburdening class teachers who will be

trying to deal with three cohorts of students in one classroom. Some students will sit the traditional leaving certificate, some will avail of accredited grades and others will choose a combination of those two options. Stress, difficulties and pressures will ensue. We must ensure that students come out of this experience better than ever and that the disruption they have suffered is made up for insofar as that is possible. What has been done in that regard? Are there plans in place to address any problems which may result?

The report of the joint committee which examined the impact of Covid-19 on primary level education identified a disparity in funding for primary and second level schools and in school leadership posts. What steps are being taken towards ending these disparities? What progress has been made? Has an assessment been made of the short-term funding needs of schools at primary and second levels in respect of allowing the safe and continued reopening of those schools?

My final question focuses on the possibility of future school closures and the likelihood of some students being forced to self-isolate or restrict their movements. Has consideration been given to the development of an online learning programme to include supports for disadvantaged students in accessing digital services and adequate broadband? That is an issue for many communities throughout the State.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** On the matter of the provision of additional resources in schools, especially for leaving certificate students, it must be acknowledged that we were more cognisant of that issue as we moved forward in our planning this year. More than 1,000 additional posts were made available for second level schools. That has been a major increase in support in our schools.

On teachers being overburdened and potentially having to deal with a cohort of students wishing to take the written exams in June and another cohort opting for the accredited grades process, we were mindful of trying to accommodate both those groups within a class. That is to take nothing away from the superb efforts made by teachers via remote learning and the huge demands now being placed on teachers in person. Operating in a Covid-19 environment is difficult; I fully accept that. In an effort to accommodate that, in the case of the accredited grades process, estimated marks and all associated information will not be uploaded by teachers until quite significantly into the month of May. That will afford students the opportunity to continue their learning, whether they are opting for the written examinations in June or the accredited grades process, and for teachers to continue their teaching. There will not be a conflict in terms of the need for students to be wholly involved in the learning processes within the classroom. That accommodation of extending the date for the provision of estimated grades as late as possible is very helpful.

Regarding the issues of funding set out in the committee's report, it is important to acknowledge that significant capitation funding has gone into schools over the past two years or so. There are two types of capitation funding, namely, funding for the day-to-day running of schools and the ancillary grant. Last year, there was a 2.5% increase in the capitation budget, which followed a 5% increase in 2019. In addition to that increase, significant funding was poured into schools to cover all the additional measures that are required this year in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. That is necessary to ensure that certain schools would not be at a disadvantage and that all of them would be able to meet the challenge of the crisis equally. It is significant funding, as I said, and includes €56 million made available for PPE, hand sanitiser and so on and €34.7 million for enhanced cleaning in schools.

In terms of the disparity the Deputy mentioned between primary and post-primary schools, it is self-evident that there is a very definite difference between primary schools and second level on a unit base level, in that post-primary school buildings are larger and have a smaller pupil-teacher ratio and more specialist rooms. There is a higher cost at post-primary for heating, lighting, cleaning etc. The disparity that exists reflects all of those specific issues.

On the question of the need for additional assistant principal I, AP1, posts, an announcement was made yesterday regarding posts within the DEIS scheme, where the threshold requirement for the appointment of a deputy principal has reduced from 700 pupils to 600. That is a very positive step forward for DEIS schools. The provision of leadership posts and posts of responsibility in schools is kept under constant review and is regularly the subject of discussions with school staff and representatives. We will continue to do that and, as I said, we have made significant strides in regard to DEIS schools.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** Dearbhaím go bhfuil mé i dTeach Laighean faoi láthair. Ar dtús, cuirim fáilte mhór roimh na hAíré. Déanaim comhghairdeas leo ar oscailt na scoileanna inné. B’ócáid an-tábhachtach é don phobal, do na páistí agus do na tuismitheoirí.

**Chairman:** I did not want to interrupt the Deputy’s fine flow of Irish but I ask that he turn on his camera.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for coming before the committee this afternoon. I commend them on the fact that schools have started the process of reopening. As they know, I share the view of the Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Muldoon, that all schools should be open, that the policies we are implementing at present are damaging to children and that when we come to look back on this time with the benefit of hindsight, children will say they were let down by adults during this period. Nevertheless, I commend the fact that the process of reopening has begun.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, in respect of children with additional needs, after which I will put a question to the Minister, Deputy Foley. Last Friday, I met parents of children with additional educational needs who are in mainstream national schools. Those children, who are in second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth classes, will not be going back to school until Monday week. The parents are very concerned that their children with special educational needs have been discriminated against compared with children with similar needs in special schools, who are already back. I said to them that I would emphasise to both the Minister of State and the Minister the importance of trying to ensure that we get children with special educational needs back to school as soon as possible.

A question that was raised with me by the parents was whether the supplementary support scheme that is operating can be regarded as appropriate in circumstances where there are special needs assistants going from one house to another. They made the valid point that this appears to be even more questionable from a public health point of view than what would be happening if children were back in school. They asked me to emphasise that from their point of view, the supplementary support scheme is not working. Is there anything the Minister of State can say to alleviate the concerns of these parents regarding the supplementary support scheme?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I thank the Deputy for his questions. I share his concern about the possibility of regression for children with special needs. Fortunately, children in special schools and special classes are now back full time, as well as junior infants up to second class. On 15 March, the other classes will also be back.

Regarding the supplementary programme, it is a voluntary scheme that is open to all students in special schools and classes, including those with the greatest need. It provides a maximum of five hours per week, for four weeks, of one-to-one teaching and learning in the home outside of school time. One of the issues we are looking at and on which we are working with the education partners is the fact that the support is provided in the evenings and at weekends. We hope to be in a position to provide a supplementary programme within the school setting. We spent €30 million on PPE for teachers last year, and will spend the same this year, and they are working with very small numbers. Like any decision the Department makes, this arrangement is based on public health advice. We would not be putting forward a programme in the first instance if we did not have the safety of the children and families involved at the forefront of our consideration. I hope that has provided some clarity for the Deputy.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** I thank the Minister of State. My next question is for the Minister and it relates to the return of schools. Fifth-year students will return on Monday week, as will the remainder of national school classes. The Minister will appreciate that for children in first to fourth year at secondary level, a return date of 12 April, which is six weeks away, is a long time to wait. Can she offer an assurance to those students and their parents that if things improve, the return date will be kept under review? The Minister would acknowledge that children have been damaged by not being back at school. Public health advice is paramount but we also have to take into account the health concerns of children, which include not just physical health concerns but the other health concerns associated with their development.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy. I acknowledge it as an indisputable fact that students are best served when they are in school. Notwithstanding that, we are living in the reality of a Covid-19 pandemic in which all of society in this country, within reason, is closed down. It is a significant endorsement of the importance of education in Irish society that education and childcare are the only sectors open during the current restrictions. When we reopened the schools in September last year and there was uninterrupted learning through to December, we closely followed the public health advice and the input of NPHE. In this instance, the latter has advised that it is looking for a cautious and phased return to school. While I would wish that we were in a position to have more children and young people in school, it is on the basis of the advice from NPHE that we are proceeding as we are. It is worth making the point that when schools were stood down, as I stated earlier, it was because of the mobility of 1.1 million people. Schools in themselves are seen as places of low transmission, and this has been echoed on a number of occasions and as late as this past weekend by Professor Philip Nolan, the deputy chief medical officer and others. It is, of course, our absolute agenda that schools would further reopen on 15 March and again on 12 April. However, there is a burden of responsibility being placed on all of society to ensure that can happen. The deputy chief medical officer has made it very clear that we must continue to see improvements and numbers coming down. We must see hospitalisations decreasing and we have seen very good news on that again today. Society must invest in this instance to ensure our schools can reopen fully and as quickly as possible.

**Senator Eileen Flynn:** I will start with a few questions for the Minister, Deputy Foley. I heard the word “equal” six or seven times from the Minister’s notes but it is not a word we should be throwing around when we know it is not true. I say this with much emotion because there are so many schools in Ireland that do not have equal funding and which are struggling. These are very disadvantaged schools, one of which is Our Lady of the Wayside in Bluebell, Dublin 12.

I have a question about the disadvantage experienced by children who have not had equal

access to the education system during the pandemic because they have no technology, such as phones. I know of one case involving a woman who must go to a school every Monday at 1 p.m. to get her children's homework. There is another family sharing one iPhone. I have been very vocal about the digital divide for many weeks and it is not something we need to look at during the pandemic. As we will need to look at it in future, what has the Department done to bridge the digital divide? I would appreciate an answer on this because it is everything but equal access when children do not have the technology to access school material. How can the Minister guarantee the calculated grades will not be prejudiced towards marginalised communities or bias against people from ethnic minority groups? I would appreciate a reply on that.

Deputy Ó Ríordáin spoke about research and unless I am wrong, the Minister said that remote learning is easier this time around. I would like to know more about that research. I support Deputy Ó Ríordáin's comments on catch-up funds, which may support young people.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Senator, who referenced the digital divide. I acknowledge the sincerity with which she raised those points. Without doubt, there will always be issues on the ground about this.

**Chairman:** The Minister's camera is not on.

**Senator Eileen Flynn:** Her words are important too.

**Chairman:** We can hear the Minister so she can continue while we work on getting the video working for broadcasting purposes.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I apologise but the video appears to be switched on. The Senator spoke about the digital divide and I am very conscious of it. In the past year alone and throughout the pandemic, over €100 million in financial resources have been made available to schools specifically with regard to information, communication and digital technology, etc. This was to afford schools the opportunity to purchase digital platforms or, as I have seen in the vast majority of schools, necessary equipment. As late as December 2020, €50 million was expedited to schools so they would have funding available for the purchase of digital equipment, including tablets and laptops. A variety of schools have purchased equipment that is loaned to students and which students have utilised throughout the pandemic. I regard this as a very positive use of the funds made available. If there are specific cases of this not happening or not being possible for whatever reason in different schools, I am keen to be made aware of them. As I have said, substantial funding has been made available and used in that respect in a variety of schools.

The Senator referred to the accredited grades system and indicated that it should not disadvantage young people from different backgrounds or marginalised or minority backgrounds. It was the experience in the system last year that it was blind to gender, background etc.

I indicated that remote learning is working more successfully this year than it did last year. The closure of schools was sudden last year and there was a lack of preparedness because it was so unexpected, and one can understand that. This year considerable work was done with schools, including the publication of guidelines that were worked through with all the partners in education, including teacher representatives, managerial bodies and students. Everybody was around the table working out the guidelines and platforms to be used by schools, as well as the contact required between parents and schools. All those guidelines were agreed and the platforms were put in place. That is exactly what I meant with respect to the preparedness for

remote learning working better this year than it did last year. Is this going to work perfectly in all cases? That is absolutely not a guarantee that can be given and there will always be difficulties. As I stated, it is in no way a replacement for in-person teaching and learning.

The Senator also asked about funding being made available for catching up. Again, I have said that I am conscious of particular cohorts of students being especially disadvantaged because of Covid-19. I have said it is my intention to make enhanced summer schemes available this year, as we had last year, with a focus on numeracy and literacy. The Senator is aware that yesterday I announced a further expansion of the school completion programme, which is of enormous benefit to many students. A further 28 schools are to be included in that programme. There is also to be an increase in funding for school completion programmes and the DEIS schools will see a one point reduction in class sizes.

**Chairman:** Some other members, including me, want to ask some questions as well. I apologise to Senator Flynn. I have a couple of questions for the Minister. I have no doubt that she and her officials have read the committee report on the impact of Covid-19 on primary and secondary schools, and the disparity between funding for primary and secondary schools. I raised the issue of vice principals in primary schools with the Minister on a previous occasion and I am aware it was also raised with the unions. I refer in particular to schools which have no permanent deputy principal. Secondary schools may have 300 or 400 students and a full-time deputy principal. A primary school could have 700, 800 or 900 pupils but no permanent deputy principal post. Has the Minister had any time to examine this? Perhaps in future negotiations with the INTO and coming up to budget time she might consider this.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Chairman. I appreciate the point he made on principals. There are issues around teaching principals, which I was very cognisant of as part of the school reopening plan. Additional days were made available to support the work of teaching principals in recognition of the particular difficulties they faced in managing many additional responsibilities due to Covid.

On making an adjudication as to whether an additional post should be made available at deputy principal level in primary schools, considerations of that nature would be for the budget going forward. I am mindful of the case the Chairman has made and it is something I will give due consideration to.

**Chairman:** I genuinely think it is important because some larger primary schools have done a significant amount of work over the past number of months. In recognition of the work they have done, it would be very welcome.

The committee will carry out an examination of leaving certificate reform, following our Covid report. Have there been any conversations within the Department at Government or official level with the unions on reform of the leaving certificate as it currently stands? I am on the public record as having said the leaving certificate is outdated and genuine reform is required. Most members of the committee would agree. What are the Minister's views? Has any work been done by her colleagues and officials or those at Government level on this issue?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** In respect of senior cycle reform, the NCCA has worked through it and has done a body of work which has almost been completed. It is currently finalising its report which will be submitted to me and officials in the Department. We will study it. I am conscious that it will most certainly provide a springboard for further discussion and an ultimate decision in terms of how we will progress with the senior cycle.

It is fair to say that the current circumstances in which we find ourselves and the accommodations we have made in light of Covid-19 for the leaving certificate classes of 2021 and 2020 have shone a light on the senior cycle. I await with anticipation the report from the NCCA and, as I said, it affording us an opportunity for further discussion with partners in education and being a vehicle for advancing decision-making.

**Chairman:** As Chair of the committee, I speak on behalf of all members when I say we will look for co-operation from the Minister's officials when we ask them to come before us as witnesses when we are carrying out the review.

On leaving certificate 2021, what provisions have the Minister and her Department made for students who are sitting the leaving certificate but cannot continue doing so because of a positive Covid test or because they have to self isolate? I refer to the High Court decision today to dismiss legal action over calculated grades. I ask the Minister to comment on both issues. I have another question on air monitors before she concludes.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** On the High Court case issued today, the Department is currently reviewing it. It is a fairly lengthy decision and will take some time to review.

The Chairman's second question related to the leaving certificate exam for 2021. I wish to acknowledge that, as I said previously, this year students have a choice. The accredited grades system and the opportunity to do written exams addresses instances where, for whatever reason, a student has opted to take a written exam but is unable to do so. Such students then fall under the accredited grades system.

**Chairman:** A report on Covid referred to ventilation in schools. What is the up-to-date position on that? Some schools have said they should have ventilation. It is up to individual schools and teachers to open or close windows, but there are no ventilation monitors. We have received correspondence from quite a number of companies which said ventilation systems can be installed quite easily. I am not sure what work the Department has done on this. Perhaps the Minister could update the committee on that.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** As I said, the guidelines and mitigation measures we have in place in schools were fully appraised and reviewed rigorously prior to the return to school, as happened when we first put them in place following public health advice. They were recently reviewed prior to the current return to school.

The guidelines on ventilation issued in September, and updated in late November and early December, made reference to having windows open before and after classes and at points during classes, and teachers using their best judgment. That advice still pertains, but we are mindful that a high level advisory expert group is carrying out a study on ventilation not just within the education sector but in general. I understand it is due to make its findings public in the not-too-distant future. Should there be some different guidance offered or new mechanisms or measures are required, we will address that. We have done that very assiduously at every stage where public health advice has asked us to amend, change or add to any measures in schools, and we will do similar on foot of this report should there be a need to change. I want to emphasise that the current advice available to us is as I have outlined.

**Chairman:** I will allow members in for one minute. I ask the Minister to correspond with the secretariat to provide a full reply.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** There is a lack of school places in north Dublin for students

transitioning from primary to second level. Is the Department aware of this issue? Is it taking moves to address it? We receive a number of queries in our office about this issue every year. This year the problem is particularly acute. I do not know if it is Covid related, but there is certainly a scarcity of places in second level across north Dublin and I wonder if the Minister could respond to that.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy Farrell.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** Deputy Farrell said he had to leave. Senator Dolan and I will speak next.

I did not get a chance to respond to the Minister of State on a couple of issues relating to mainstream schools. We have all had much correspondence regarding the fact that many may have to wait for a number of weeks. First, is she willing to look at an alternative where they may come in earlier if public health advice will allow?

Second, will she also give assurances there will not be backsliding and, therefore, in a position where schools close? Is this it now? Will these special schools stay open? That is the kind of clarity people require.

I do not want to be a negative Nelly about ventilation. It is, however, becoming more recognised that the kind of human activity in which we are engaged, which is not running in parallel with nature, may force us into these pandemics. When we consider ventilation, it is beyond looking at a review of mitigation measures for this pandemic, but at what we actually need to do to future-proof our schools against more public health problems.

**Chairman:** I thank the Senator. We are under time pressures. Senator Dolan has one minute.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I want to quickly acknowledge the Minister's announcement yesterday about delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, and DEIS Urban and reducing the staffing.

I would like to point out to Mr. Loftus as the departmental official over school buildings that it is 25 years since Scoil An Chroí Naofa was promised an amalgamation and a new school. Planning permission has expired. What is the longest-running school building project at stage 2B? There are currently 200 buildings on site, with €740 million allocated for school buildings this year. We really need to see movement from stage 2B to stage 3 on this project. I ask the official or the Minister to respond.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy Conway-Walsh.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** The main issue being highlighted is that the mental health and well-being of our children and young people has been impacted. The immediate challenge for us, however, is how we ensure this impact is temporary and not permanent. While I acknowledge the Minister mentioned the €2 million, it is hugely important, therefore, that money is front-loaded into the mental health services, and the interface between mental health services and education, to ensure the proper interventions are made. If we delay in those interventions, the long-term economic and social costs for us, as well as the human cost for the children, is unthinkable as it is at the moment. That is my main ask from the Minister.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy Ó'Laoghaire.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I will come back to the Minister's reply to the first round of questions. In fairness, two of them were responded to very clearly. On the last one, however, my understanding of the responses we have been given is that if there is a localised lockdown in a particular country, exams may not happen and there will not be a second opportunity. I have no issue with public health providing advice that something cannot happen because it is not safe or whatever. However, I believe this issue can be resolved. This is an ordinary course of the leaving certificate where a person has a paper B. I do not see why that cannot be facilitated, whether it is for a localised lockdown or a student who is self-isolating. That person might not even be ill. He or she might be perfectly capable of sitting the exam and may have put huge work into preparation for oral examinations and all the rest. We need to fix this. It does not seem to me to be contrary to public health advice or beyond fixing.

**Chairman:** Is Senator O'Loughlin there? No. Senators Mullen and Flynn and Deputies Nolan, Jim O'Callaghan and Pádraig O'Sullivan have also left.

I want to thank the Minister and the Minister of State and their officials for coming before us virtually today. I ask both Ministers to give a written reply to the questions that were asked late through the secretariat, which we can pass on to the members.

The discussion has been both beneficial and informative for members, and I hope, for the Minister and Minister of State as well. I have no doubt that we will have them and their officials back in before the committee in the not-so-distant future. We would like to call both of them back in on a number of issues, specifically, the Minister on the leaving certificate. I will adjourn the meeting until Thursday, 11 March 2021 at 11.30 a.m. for a private meeting on Microsoft Teams. Do the Minister or Minister of State wish to add anything before I close the meeting?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Chairman and the committee. I appreciate the enormous body of work, in particular, that has gone into the key recommendations of the joint committee's report on Covid-19. It is an excellent document. I look forward to continuing to engage with the committee. I appreciate the experience and the shared interest members all have in advancing education positively.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I thank the Chairman for facilitating the meeting today and inviting us to partake. I thank all members of the committee for their invaluable contributions, which also help us as Ministers in developing policy and ensuring we are on the right track on everything.

**Chairman:** I thank all witness, officials and members.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.07 p.m. until 11.30 a.m. on Thursday, 11 March 2021.