

# 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

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*Dé Máirt, 21 Meán Fómhair 2021*

*Tuesday, 21 September 2021*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 4.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 4.30 p.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Aisling Dolan,
Alan Farrell,	Fiona O'Loughlin,
Carol Nolan,	Pauline O'Reilly.
Jim O'Callaghan,	
Marc Ó Cathasaigh,	
Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire,	
Aodhán Ó Ríordáin.	

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

### **Business of Joint Committee.**

**Chairman:** The committee is meeting in public session virtually through Microsoft Teams in committee room 4 in Leinster House, with a number of members present in the room as well. Apologies have been received from Senator Flynn and Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan. I congratulate Senator Flynn and Deputies Ó Laoghaire and Pádraig O’Sullivan on the additions to their families over the last number of weeks. Deputy Ó Laoghaire is in attendance, but Senator Flynn and Deputy O’Sullivan are on maternity and parental leave, respectively. We congratulate all of them and hope that everything is going well.

I remind members to ensure that their mobile phones are switched off for the duration of the meeting as they interfere with the broadcasting equipment even if on silent mode. I also remind them of the constitutional requirement that to participate in public meetings they must be physically present within the confines and place in which Parliament has chosen to meet, namely, Leinster House. I will not permit a member to participate if not adhering to the constitutional requirement. Any member who attempts to participate from outside of the precincts of Leinster House will be asked to leave the meeting.

The minutes of the meeting of 14 September 2021 have been circulated. Are the minutes agreed? Agreed.

### **Reopening of Schools, Cork Life Centre, School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health: Discussion.**

**Chairman:** The committee is meeting today with the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State with responsibility for special educational needs and inclusion, Deputy Madigan. On behalf of the committee, I welcome them to the meeting. The Minister and Minister of State are here today to update the committee on the safe and sustainable reopening of schools, formal recognition of sustainable funding and teaching posts for the Cork Life Centre and the implementation of the key recommendations of the joint committee report on school bullying and the impact on mental health. I note the correspondence received today from the Minister, Deputy Foley, and Mr. Don O’Leary, director of Cork Life Centre, which have been circulated to members. In terms of format for the meeting, I will invite the Minister, Deputy Foley, to make an opening statement of five minutes, followed by an opening statement by the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, of three minutes. The statements will be followed by questions from members of the committee, with each member having a six-minute slot for questions and answers.

I ask the Minister and Minister of State to note that they have been invited to this meeting to discuss the key policy issues and that their officials cannot comment on Government policy. Officials should not be asked to speak unless absolutely necessary to confirm a technical point for the Minister. However, ideally such a point should be in written format passed to the Minister or Minister of State. The Minister and Minister of State will be aware the joint committee will publish their opening statements on its website following today’s meeting.

Before we begin, I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses of the Oireachtas or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her

identifiable.

Unfortunately, I am unable to chair all of today's meeting. I propose that Deputy Alan Farrell take the Chair at 5 p.m.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I second the nomination.

**Chairman:** Deputy Alan Farrell will take the Chair at 5.45 p.m. Is that agreed? Agreed. I now invite the Minister, Deputy Foley, to make opening statement, followed by the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan.

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I am pleased to be before the committee as we begin a new Dáil term to discuss a number of important issues in the education sector. First, I join the Chairman in congratulating Deputies Ó Laoghaire and Pádraig O'Sullivan and Senator Flynn and their families. It is a wonderful family time. Best wishes to them all.

I am joined by a number of departmental officials today, including in Kildare House, by Ms Deirdre Shanley, Ms Martina Mannion, Mr. Hubert Loftus, Ms Yvonne Keating and Ms Anne Tansey. In its invitation, the committee set three important topics for discussion today. I look forward to hearing the views of committee members on these topics.

I will turn first to the safe and sustainable reopening of schools. I wish to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of all of the education partners working together with the Department of Education and with public health to ensure our schools could remain operational throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The safe return and sustained safe reopening of our schools this month has been a key priority across the Government. We are all aware of the adverse consequences of school closures, which impacts on well-being, on learning and on children's social and emotional development.

In recent weeks, the Government approved the implementation of a new Covid learning and supports scheme, CLASS, which will help to mitigate the impact of Covid on students' learning and well-being. This scheme offers additional targeted teaching hours to every primary and post-primary school in the country to support students' learning and well-being in the coming school year. I have introduced this programme to further mitigate the impacts of the loss of learning caused by school closures. This programme is in addition to the supplementary programme in spring 2021 and the significantly expanded summer programme which catered for up to 33,000 students. Overall, more than €100 million has been spent on these measures, in addition to the €639 million which was spent over the last school year to support their operation in a Covid-19 environment. The Minister of State and I are particularly pleased to be bringing this initiative.

Throughout the pandemic, the Department of Education has worked intensively with public health professionals from across the health sector and the HSE to support schools. We have been guided by their expertise in all we have done. In advance of reopening, and indeed since schools have reopened, these experts have reviewed the measures put in place to ensure safe operation of schools, and they are satisfied these infection prevention and control measures, when implemented correctly and adhered to, will continue to keep the school community safe.

These measures range from the reconfiguration of classrooms and other school spaces to support physical distancing to significant additional funding for additional cleaning and hygiene measures, as well as more than 1,080 additional teaching posts to ensure appropriate distancing can be put in place. Funding has also been made available for additional administrative

leave days for principals and to provide for substitution arrangements.

The Department of Education has also issued updated advice to schools on good ventilation practices. For this new school year we are providing schools with CO2 monitors. These monitors will help to guide schools about when they need to open or close their windows to increase the ventilation. Some 25,000 CO2 monitors have been delivered to schools this week, and 96% of primary schools, including all special schools, have received their full allocation of CO2 monitors. Every post-primary school has received a minimum of ten CO2 monitors.

Lennox Laboratories was on target to have the full amount of 35,000 CO2 monitors delivered to schools shortly. Unfortunately, however, Lennox Laboratories has been informed by the manufacturer that there is a delay with the delivery of the last batch of 10,000 CO2 monitors, due to a fault with the LCD display unit. While I am disappointed at the news of a delay, Lennox Laboratories has identified options that should enable the remaining balance of CO2 monitors to be distributed to schools in late September and early October. In the interim, the Department has advised schools that if they wish they can make arrangements directly for procuring the balance of their CO2 monitors directly themselves rather than via the central arrangements currently in place.

Naturally, the safety of our school communities, and indeed broader society, has been greatly bolstered by Ireland's highly successful vaccination programme. Through the incredible efforts of everyone involved, more than 90% of over-16s have been fully vaccinated, the highest such percentage in the EU, and nearly 87% of over-12s have received their full vaccination.

I turn now to the second item for discussion today, which is the formal recognition, sustainable funding and teaching posts for Cork Life Centre. I am pleased my Department, with support from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Cork Education and Training Board, ETB, has put in place a very significant package of funding and teaching hours, to which the board of Cork Life Centre has responded positively, stating it recognises it is a welcome step towards securing the sustainability of the centre.

Shortly after I was appointed Minister last year, I met with Don O'Leary from the Cork Life Centre. The centre provides a considerable service to a cohort of learners with a diverse range of needs. The outcomes of what is delivered in Cork Life Centre was evident before this committee last December when students from the centre spoke with passion and clarity about their experiences and how the centre has supported them in their journey through education. I am pleased, therefore, that significant progress has been made regarding a package of supports that will substantially increase the funding and teaching hours for the centre and will ensure students continue to have the opportunity to access all which the centre has to offer.

The final item for today relates to the implementation of the key recommendations in the joint committee report on School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health. I thank the Oireachtas joint committee for its work in this area. For a child or young person, the experience of bullying can be a deeply traumatic one and stands in direct opposition to the sense of security, opportunity, and nourishment we hope all of our students feel in the school system. I know bullying experienced by even one child or young person is one too many and I commit to doing all we can to prevent its occurrence. Coming from the school sector, I know how seriously this issue is treated by schools, but I also know we must continue to do all we can to support schools in addressing it directly.

The Department has implemented a number of ongoing anti-bullying measures, which in-

clude implementing the anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools; monitoring of schools' anti-bullying measures by the inspectorate; implementation of the well-being policy statement and framework for practice; provision of a greater focus on inclusive education in teacher training; provision of supports for schools in online safety; implementation of the social, personal and health education, SPHE, and relationships and sexuality education, RSE, curriculum; provision of funding to the National Parents' Council for anti-bullying training for parents; provision of funding to the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre towards its research and training programmes and for the national anti-bullying website *www.tacklebullying.ie*; provision of funding to *Webwise.ie* to promote the safe use of the Internet and prevent cyberbullying; and the provision of funding to BeLonG To youth services to support delivery of the Stand Up! campaign in post primary schools.

I recognise, however, that there is much more work that needs to be done in this area, and I am committed to doing this work. In this regard, I wish to advise the committee of a number of measures currently being undertaken by my Department. I am pleased to be able to announce that during this school year the inspectorate is prioritising monitoring and the gathering of information about the implementation of anti-bullying measures in schools across all its inspection types. As part of this work, the inspectorate will also identify and report on examples of effective practice in preventing and tackling bullying in schools. This will help provide evidence of the type of bullying that is occurring in our schools and examples of approaches that can be successful in dealing with it.

Starting this week also, the inspectorate will be looking at bullying matters through a comprehensive programme of incidental inspections in primary and post-primary schools. These inspections will result in feedback to individual schools about how they are implementing anti-bullying procedures as well as the publication of an interim composite report on how the anti-bullying procedures are being implemented.

From the beginning of 2022, the monitoring of anti-bullying measures within schools will be extended to all inspection types and will include looking at the actions of the school to create a positive school culture as well as the implementation of important aspects of the anti-bullying procedures. The inspectorate will, during quarters 3 and 4 in 2022, carry out focused anti-bullying inspections in schools.

I also am pleased to announce to the committee that I have asked my Department to review and update the action plan on bullying and the anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools. This review will take account of developments and relevant research since the action plan and procedures were first published and will specifically consider areas such as cyberbullying and gender identity bullying. This work will involve significant collaboration across my Department, with other Departments and bodies and with the national anti-bullying research centre at DCU, and will also involve consultation with a broad range of education stakeholders, including students. As part of this work my Department will give detailed consideration to the recommendations contained in the joint committee's report.

I would also like to take this opportunity to advise the committee that I am fully committed to progressing the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019 through the Houses of the Oireachtas. As advised during Second Stage, I am bringing forward amendments to the Bill to make it more inclusive of our entire school community. I am proposing the Bill be amended from a student and parent charter to a school community charter. It is vitally important the engagement and listening culture the charter provides for is inclusive of the whole school community, which includes staff, students and parents. Under this Bill, schools will be required to

provide a range of information to the school community on school plans and policies such as the school anti-bullying policy and how complaints are dealt with. While we know very many schools already provide this information, the Bill will allow for consistency.

I thank the committee for the invitation to attend today, to update on school reopening, to speak on the Cork Life Centre, and to outline the measures the Department is progressing to prevent and tackle bullying in our schools, many of which relate to the excellent recommendations in the joint committee's report. I particularly want to acknowledge all the hard work that has been done by school communities in recent weeks. It is wonderful to see students back in their classrooms with their teachers, special needs assistants, SNAs, and support staff.

With the agreement of the Chairman I invite the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, to address the committee.

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I echo the congratulations to Senator Flynn and Deputies Ó Laoghaire and Pádraig O'Sullivan on their good news.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to update the members on important measures to address the continuing the impact of Covid-19 on the education experience of children and young people. Even though Covid-19 has impacted on all parts of society, we must always remember that some groups have been impacted more than others. Those in society who require additional supports or have particular needs have found the past two years to be more difficult than others have.

Being the Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion at this time has enabled me to bring a particular focus to the challenges faced by children with special needs and those most at risk of educational disadvantage. I have a particular focus on inclusion in school. The issues being discussed today by the committee are very relevant in this context, especially the work of Cork Life Centre, which the Minister has addressed, and include the use of reduced school days by schools and the matter of school bullying, both of which I will talk about later.

As members of this committee are aware, the closure of schools for extended periods over the past two years due to Covid restrictions made accessing education much more difficult for this vulnerable group. We have all heard how remote teaching and learning has been extremely difficult for many children and young people with disabilities. The break with normal routines, coupled with the absence of the customised teaching and care supports provided in the school environment, deepened the impact of the Covid restrictions on this group of young people and children. I know from my many encounters with young people and their parents, families and advocacy groups that this impact reaches into the families. Young people themselves also bear witness to this impact.

The loss of connection with education, school staff and friends was a real concern for families and schools alike. Notwithstanding the significant investment of €2 billion already being made in special education prior to the pandemic, additional measures were and continue to be required to support this group. I will outline some of these measures developed and put in place by the Minister and me over recent months, which I believe are making a positive difference to the lives of these children and young people who have been most impacted by Covid-19.

Looking back, the Government was correct to prioritise special education in the reopening

of schools earlier this year. The supplementary programme, which provided a much needed ongoing connection with education through the provision of in-home tuition or care during the period of school closure earlier this year, was much appreciated by families. I am happy to report that more than 14,000 of the most vulnerable pupils availed of this programme at a cost of more than €10 million. Building on this theme of connection with education, we have an enhanced suite of summer programmes for children with special educational needs and those who are disadvantaged during the vacation period. A fund of €40 million has been provided for this purpose. The level of take up has been very good. I will know in the coming weeks when all of the claims have been processed exactly how many availed of it.

Under the new Covid learning and support programme, CLASS, which the Minister referenced, every school can draw down additional teaching hours based on enrolment during the 2021-22 school year. These hours will be used to support those students who, in the schools' opinion, have been impacted upon most by the disrupted school experience of the past two years. More than €50 million is being set aside for this programme. At this point, I acknowledge the work of schools, teachers and SNAs who have worked together with families and students through the pandemic period to ensure our schools could reopen on a safe and sustainable basis.

There are two other matters on which I would like to update the committee, both of which impact on the inclusion of students in schools. These are the use of reduced school days by schools and school bullying. With regard to the use of reduced school days, I was pleased to announce last week the publication of guidelines in this regard. The guidelines are intended to ensure reduced school days are used in a limited manner and only where absolutely necessary. We have taken into account the experiences outlined by parents and advocacy groups in various fora, including at the joint Oireachtas committee. In addition, we have also taken on board the views expressed by schools and education partners. A fundamental principle is that the consent of parents is central to the process prior to implementation of a reduced school day. The guidelines are also intended to ensure there is a consistency in approach. Where a reduced school day arrangement is put in place, it should be time-bound and a plan to reintegrate the student to full day attendance should form part of the overall process.

We have also committed to ensure robust data collection on the use of reduced school days. The guidelines will be applicable from 1 January 2022. From that date, schools will be required to notify Tusla education support service, TESS, when a reduced school day is being put in place. In the interim, schools are being asked to review arrangements currently in place and, in particular, to review the circumstances of any pupil currently on reduced school days. This will allow time for transition arrangements for pupils and schools.

On school bullying, I echo the sentiments the Minister has expressed. We must foster a school culture based on respect and inclusion for children with special educational needs. When bullying does happen it should be acknowledged and addressed appropriately. To do this, we need to consider bullying in an holistic manner and we need to take a whole school community approach.

I will continue to look at ways to address ongoing issues of concern for the inclusion of children and young people in education. In the budget, I will seek to increase as much as possible the level of resources available for teachers and SNAs so that our children and young people with additional needs will continue to have the necessary supports to get an education, which is their entitlement. This will continue to be my priority.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for their opening statements. I have a number of questions, after which I will invite Deputy Ó Laoghaire to contribute as this will give Deputy Alan Farrell time to get here to take over as Acting Chair. I welcome that schools reopened in September. It is fantastic to see primary and post-primary schools and third level colleges, which are under the remit of the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, get going in September. There has been a bit of dispute over what is a close contact and what is not. Will the Minister clarify the difference between a close contact in a school setting and a close contact in the wider community? There has been a lot of confusion out there in recent weeks.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Chair. I repeat that in terms of the adjudication of close contact in the school environment, that adjudication is made by public health. It is a tremendous asset to our schools that we have school teams in place. They are supplemented by more than 120 departmental staff co-operating with public health. The adjudication on close contact is made by them, conscious of the environment that exists within a school, which is very different to the environment we find in wider society. They are also conscious of the infection prevention and control measures that are unique to the school environment. In some instances, when public health makes its adjudication it analyses the layout of the room and the number of children. Perhaps a pod may need to be stood down. This is strictly a public health adjudication. It is different to wider society because of the mitigation measures in existence in our schools.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister. I note her correspondence today regarding the Cork Life Centre. I have a number of questions, but I want to get feedback from the Cork Life Centre first and I will come back to the Minister on it. I also want to discuss it with committee members who might have other questions on the issue.

What progress is being made on the roll-out of the hot school meals programme to all schools? This is a recommendation the committee made to the Department a number of months ago. Does the Minister accept that there is a need for a nationwide programme? It would be transformative for students' mental and physical health. It is something that came up in our work on bullying in recent months.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** As I said in my opening remarks, I acknowledge the very impressive work the committee has been involved in, specifically on issues of bullying and anti-bullying. On the hot school meals, the Chair will appreciate it does not fall within the remit of the Department of Education. It is within the remit of a different Department. The Chair will also note there was increased funding this year from that Department. We continue to engage with that Department on an ongoing basis. It does not fall within the remit of the Department of Education.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister. I know it falls under the remit of the Department of Social Protection and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. I welcome the Minister's comments on the school bullying report we compiled, specifically her comments on the 2013 action plan on bullying and the 2013 bullying procedures. We all accept that they are totally outdated. This has been stated on numerous occasions by many of the witnesses who came before the committee during our negotiations on school bullying. The Minister has said she will do a body of work on this. I hope there will not be delays on this. I do not want a specific date but when does the Minister envisage she will be able to update and publish the new guidelines on the 2013 action plan on bullying and on the 2013 anti-bullying procedures?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I acknowledge that there is excellent best practice in many schools



in respect of this matter. It is important that we preface all of our remarks by saying that. Notwithstanding that and as stated earlier, I am committed to reviewing the action plan on bullying and the anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools. I am committed to doing that as a matter of priority. My Department is currently drawing together that body of work. It will involve wide engagement within the education sector and beyond, such as with DCU, an institution with which we have already engaged. It will be the widest possible engagement.

As we sit here today, there are significant new developments on procedures within our schools. For example, this week alone, a series of incidental inspections will take place. Our inspectorate, as part of those inspections, will be looking at and reviewing best practice within our schools in terms of bullying and anti-bullying procedures. It is also my intention that when those incidental inspections have been completed, a composite report will be put together on best practice. I believe in the shared experience of learning and that when we see best practice, we share it. That is of benefit to the entire school community.

Equally importantly, from 2022, we will be giving a commitment that all inspections will have an integral element of the inspection, irrespective of the type of inspection that takes place within a school, that there will be a specific focus on a positive school culture and climate. This will contemplate anti-bullying measures, etc. That is an important step forward. This will now be an aspect of all the evaluations carried out by the inspectorate, beginning with the incidental inspections this week. It is a commitment. On the action plan and the anti-bullying procedures, many of the commitments relating to the action plan are cross-departmental in nature. However, we are committed to honouring them.

I have also outlined other measures that are ongoing in our schools. Extremely positive steps are being taken. I am conscious that one child or young person experiencing bullying is one too many. As stated, there is an absolute commitment moving forward in respect of many of the issues I have outlined.

**Chairman:** When she is reviewing the action plan, I ask the Minister to take into consideration the report that was compiled by the committee.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I want to acknowledge that impressive body of work. I will take on board many of the recommendations in the report. We will continue to engage with the committee and with the Chair on an ongoing basis.

**Chairman:** I do not need a reply today, but one of the issues that arises relates to a key recommendation in the committee's report on emotional and therapeutic supports. Primary and post-primary school principals and teachers contacted me about that matter when I spoke about the report and they highlighted the importance of emotional and therapeutic supports. These could be rolled out in some of the schools in order to look at how it would work, best practice, etc.

The committee is going to start a body of work on the leaving certificate curriculum. Has the Minister given any consideration to the inclusion of a mental health and well-being component that could, among other things, help to reduce the incidence and negative impact of bullying? Could she confirm when she will respond to the National Council and Curriculum Assessment, NCCA, senior cycle review advisory report and make it public? We would like to have the NCCA before the committee. However, it will not do so until the report is published and made public. As Chair of the committee and on behalf of all its members, I ask the Minister to make the report public as soon as possible in order that we can get on with the body of work

on leaving certificate reform.

Does the Department have any plans to roll-out the FUSE programme nationally? Budget 2022 is fast approaching. I have been approached regarding the cut in funding for books for school and, specifically, for school libraries. A cut to the funding was introduced in 2008 due to the recession and was never restored. I ask the Minister to look at this matter. Allocating €10 in respect of every primary schoolgoing child, would be of major assistance in the context of the buying of books. This would involve using a small part of the Department's budget - a little over €6 million. I ask the Minister to give consideration to this matter. I know there will be many requests of her over the coming weeks, but I ask her to look specifically at funding for children's books in school libraries.

The Minister can send direct replies to these questions to the clerk. I am holding up other members. I will call Deputy Ó Laoghaire and I ask Deputy Alan Farrell to take the Chair.

*Deputy Alan Farrell took the Chair.*

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I thank the Chair and the Minister for their kind wishes. They are appreciated by me and my wife. Baby and mammy are doing great altogether. Thank you very much.

I will start off with the Cork Life Centre. I am encouraged by and welcome the Minister's statement. I welcome it because it does not seem to suggest, as I feared it would, that everything has been fixed. Everything is not fixed. There is a proposal on the table that is welcome. It is something that could be worked with, but it is not there yet. I welcome the fact that the Minister clearly acknowledged that. I encourage her, and all the parties involved in the Cork Life Centre and education and training board, ETB, to continue to engage and try to reach a solution. I ask the Minister for a commitment to do that: to continue working on this. In addition, I ask her, if possible to state whether she believes that the staff at the Cork Life Centre needs to be supported and retrained. There is a lot of experience there. Perhaps the Minister can give a comment on that.

On the return to school, it is welcome that the schools are back. I commend everyone involved that effort, from parents, teachers, staff to everyone in the Department and the Minister. However, it is fair to say that in some schools the return has been disrupted, it has been challenging and, to be honest, in some places it has been downright chaotic. There are two primary reasons for that. The first is confusion regarding self-isolation, who is supposed to self-isolate and the circumstances relating to close contacts. We have reports that the criteria are going to change and that this has been as good as agreed by NPHE. However, there is no real clarity or certainty in that regard. I have been in contact with principals in my constituency and across the State. Many of them have raised with me the fact that they feel isolated and that they do not feel that they are getting the support they received last spring. They feel that it is too hard to get through to the HSE and that they are being asked to do the job of public health themselves.

I will come back in just later on this, but I just want to ask the Minister if she has picked up the phone to the HSE. Has she asked them if they providing the same resources? I appreciate that there are a number of Departments involved, but this is a cross-governmental issue. Are they putting in the resources? Has she gone to the HSE to say that her staff and principals need help and they are not getting it? That is one question. The other question is that there is talk that the guidelines are going to change and that asymptomatic close contacts will not have to self-isolate. What is happening? Will there be a change on 27 September, or when will it happen?

What will the change be? What can we anticipate is going to happen in the next few weeks?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I will respond in the first instance the question of the Cork Life Centre. I appreciate the Deputy's positive contribution and his acknowledgement that this has been a long process of consistent engagement, discussion, debate and sharing of thoughts and ideas between the officials of the Department, Cork Life Centre and the ETB. I acknowledge the generous spirit of openness and co-operation displayed in terms of finding a pathway forward. I acknowledge that this will require ongoing engagement. It is fair to state, however, that significant progress has been made in the context of funding, co-operation hours and many of the other issues that were brought to our attention by the Cork Life Centre in the first place. I assure the Deputy that I and my officials are determined to continue that engagement and progress matters as required.

On the return to school, as already stated, it is wonderful to see our schools back. It is wonderful to see the school communities operating, and I acknowledge the work they have done in this regard. Significant resources are being put in place to allow this to happen. We must ensure that the infection prevention and control measures continue in our schools. Interestingly enough, while they are being withdrawn from other aspects of society, they are not being withdrawn from our schools. We know that last year more than €635 million was provided. This term alone, we are looking at €57 million for all of the measures required in our schools. Significant provision has been made.

In terms of support in our schools for principals, I acknowledge that specific work has been done in this respect also. Additional days have been made available for administrative staff. There is also lead workers. Notwithstanding this, when issues arise I appreciate the difficulty for principals. It is for this reason we were very keen that the school teams would be put in place. I acknowledge the work of the HSE and public health in this respect, specifically the additional staff coming from the Department to supplement them. I appreciate that at times in recent weeks there have been pinch points. I also acknowledge that we have engaged, and continue to engage, on an ongoing basis with the HSE and public health. Where there was a requirement for additional resourcing from the HSE I acknowledge my gratitude that it was forthcoming in recent days.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I have only a few seconds left and I have a further question to pose.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** This was resourcing to put the additional staffing in place. No principal should have the burden of carrying out the contact tracing. Public health has made very clear that if a child is diagnosed that child is then out of school. The HSE is automatically informed of the diagnosis and the HSE will come forward.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I am anxious to ask my other question. The Minister needs to lean on the HSE to provide more resources. One area of confusion is that there seems to be a discrepancy between the advice the HSE is providing and the advice contained in the Covid-19 response plan provided by the Department of Education as to when a child should self-isolate and the symptoms involved. The Department document outlines a number of common symptoms and other uncommon symptoms. These include runny noses and stuffy noses. Obviously, these are very common among children. The document states that if people have any symptoms of Covid-19, they should self-isolate. The HSE advice, under a heading on when it is okay to send a child to school or childcare, states if children have been told by the HSE they are a close contact, it is usually okay to send them to school or childcare if they only have

nasal symptoms such as runny nose or a sneeze. To be honest, we have had it ourselves and we kept the child at home. Families will face tens of thousands of situations with runny noses. Perhaps not tens of thousands, but certainly thousands. The Department of Education is saying not to send the children in and the HSE is saying that it is okay to do so. Will the Minister clarify the position? Some of the confusion is because it is not clear which symptoms require self-isolation and which do not. It is a problem coming from the HSE and the Department, whichever one is on the right side.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I want to be very clear that the advice we offer is the advice we get from public health. This is as a consequence of the ongoing engagement we have with public health. Throughout the summer we continued to engage with it and we continue to do so now. The advice from public health is that children should stay at home if they are unwell. It is a precautionary measure. There is the absolute understanding that parents know their own children best. If children are feeling unwell they should be kept at home. Again, there is-----

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The term “unwell” covers the whole world. An endless number of things come under the heading “unwell”. The HSE is saying in one place it is okay to send children in if they have a runny nose and the Department of Education is saying something else. I know it is following public health advice, or at least making the best attempt to do so, but there clearly is an incoherence and it needs to be fixed. It is unfair on principals, it is unfair on schools and it is particularly unfair on parents and their children if they can find two different Government sources telling them two different things.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** To be fair, I would have to say to the Deputy that the advice our principals and our parents and guardians are being asked to follow is the advice that has been provided by public health to the Department. This is the advice that is disseminated to the schools and organisations. There has been an enormous body of work in terms of getting this information out to parents in a variety of different languages on social media and on the Department’s website. There are videos from public health experts such as Dr. Abigail Collins. There is no confusion in the information that has been disseminated directly to parents and directly to school leaders. It is the information that comes from the Department of Education which, in turn, has come from the experts in public health who are dealing with schools. There is no issue there.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Something has got lost along the way. This needs to be clarified. There is no doubt about it.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I thank the Deputy and the Minister. I am next on the list of speakers and I have some questions on the same subject matter. I want to bring this to the attention of the Minister because I have spoken to more than a dozen principals of secondary schools and nine principals of primary schools in the past week. They have reported a delay in the notification of close contacts. They are getting the notification from the school through parents, the children themselves or hearsay but the notification of an actual close contact is taking another day. I fully appreciate that is the duty of the Department of Health and the public health officials to do this. It was, of course, in the second week back in school and, therefore, many children were circulating at primary and secondary level. I want to report this to the Minister because it was a point made to me by a number of principals. They believed it was important to mention.

On foot of the conversations I had in recent weeks, I want to report some positive things that came to my attention. These were unprompted remarks from principals at both levels. They

were pleased with the supports they were given for school cleaning. Particularly last year, they felt very informed in terms of making decisions on the provision of additional supports, whether administrative, teaching or otherwise. This was at both levels. A number of principals, unprompted, suggested this to me. It is worth mentioning because, as is often the case at these committees as the Minister will understand, we focus on the problems. I wanted to focus on the positives.

I will now pivot to make some remarks. I thank the Chair for raising the hot school meals programme. It is a very worthy endeavour by the Department of Social Protection. I know it is not in the remit of the Minister's Department. It is important and I would like to see an initiative, particularly when it comes to the infrastructure in certain schools that cannot cater for these measures. I would be interested to know whether it would be the job of the Department of Education to provide certain schools that may not have them with the funding to build the necessary facilities to provide hot meals. Would it be supported in some manner through the Department of Social Protection? This is a really brief question and I would like a really brief answer if the Minister would not mind.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy for relaying the very positive remarks he has received from principals in both sectors. I will make a quick remark on the view expressed on delays in contact tracing once a child has been positively diagnosed. I want to repeat to the Deputy what has been repeated by public health. It states once a child is diagnosed as Covid positive the HSE is automatically informed and is aware of it. I do appreciate that, as the Deputy has said, that in some instances the school hears it elsewhere. The HSE has been very clear. It has stated that removing the child from school it is the first and immediate step that needs to be taken. It will then make contact with the school directly. It is our experience, and we have followed this, that it will be either the same day or next day contact. The HSE has said this is sufficient in terms of procedure. I just want to acknowledge that.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I appreciate that and I thank the Minister. I asked about additional supports for schools for the hot meals programme.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** As the Deputy has acknowledged, the hot meals programme is under the remit of the Department of Social Protection. Particularly in the past year, significant funding has been made available to schools for whatever minor works they deem necessary. In fact, there were two tranches of minor works funding paid to schools. For the first time, minor works grants were paid to second level schools. Schools have used the funding in different ways. Freedom was provided to schools to use the funding as they deemed necessary to benefit their students in the best way. That is the only comment I will make other than to say the matter is within the remit of another Department.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** That is absolutely understood and accepted.

I am afraid my next remark also relates to another Department. It ties into the review and the expenditure announcement the Minister made in her opening statement. It relates to the general emotional and therapeutic supports the committee has recommended in its report to her, which she has acknowledged. One of the points made to me during my ring-around of schools in September, which I always do, was that we should figure out how the Department could further the committee's ambition to provide pooled support to schools in terms of professionals to endeavour to attend to students who are going through difficult times. My reference to other Departments relates to child and adult mental health services, CAMHS, and how interlinked everything is.

Deputy Ó Laoghaire, with whom I worked on the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs during the term of the previous Dáil, and I will be very much aware that there is a great disparity between what is required and what is available, including what is available in terms of consistent support. I appreciate the matter does not concern the Department of Education. However, I ask that the relevant officials from the Departments of Health and Education come together to try to figure out how to improve the supports being offered to children. The Minister is a constituency Deputy, just like me. Deputy Jim O'Callaghan and all the other members will have stories about the lack of support offered by CAMHS and the lack consistency. When the service is available, it is fantastic, but gaining access to it is a disaster. That is why the committee made the recommendation on additional emotional and therapeutic supports. We already recognise that there is a shortfall. Is it possible for the Minister, when considering the implementation of the recommendation, to talk to the HSE and relevant officials and endeavour to improve the overall supports available to students at both primary and secondary levels?

I am way over time. I am in the Chair so I do not want to take advantage. I ask the Minister and Minister of State to comment on the matter in general, as opposed to commenting on what I have put on the record.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** Since the reopening of our schools last year, and again this year, the emphasis has very much been on well-being. I ensured in the budget that 120 guidance posts and 17 additional National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, posts would be made available. I am pleased to be able to state a well-being platform is being provided whereby all the resources required for schools are on a single platform. We are also considering the national roll-out of continuing professional development, CPD, for schools.

On the Chairman's point on the Department of Health, there is excellent co-operation between it and my Department. The provision of services in the community is strictly within the remit of the Department of Health. The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Butler, and I have engaged quite considerably based on her responsibility for mental health and well-being. I am very much working with her to examine opportunities for a cross-departmental approach to supporting ongoing work in the community that it might be possible to mirror within the schools. Significant progress has been made on well-being provision within our schools but we are always open to this cross-departmental approach.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I thank the Minister for that.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I thank the Acting Chair. He has raised a really important question. From my perspective, it is a question of CLASS, which involves an allocation of €52.6 million in respect of what we call the autumn programme. This is the last in a suite of measures we put in place for this year, not just for children with additional needs but also for children from a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, background who have suffered from grief and loss, but also mental health issues specifically, and other children who might not normally have needed support.

At the very beginning of the pandemic, the Minister and I talked about ensuring a reduction in the risk of regression. The well-being element that the chairman talked about is critical. There is additional NEPS assistance in terms of reopening the schools. CLASS, in addition to the anti-bullying provisions already outlined by the Minister, will assist with that.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I thank the Minister, and I thank Deputy Jim O'Callaghan for his patience.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** I thank the Chairman. I welcome the Minister and Minister of State. I commend both of them for the great work they have done on ensuring we got children back to national and secondary schools. When the history of the pandemic is written, it will be recognised that certain groups were disproportionately affected. One of them comprised schoolchildren.

Let me repeat a point that the Chairman made. Schools and principals are very pleased with the supports that have been put in place. I know that from speaking to them but also from the fact that I have not been communicated with by principals in the constituency complaining about a lack of support.

There is some confusion over close contacts. It might benefit Ministers if there were greater clarity on that issue. Unvaccinated schoolchildren who are close contacts and who are not displaying any symptoms should remain at school. They should go to school. We need to take into account that there are great benefits from having 92% of the population vaccinated. One benefit is such that we have to start prioritising and re-emphasising the importance of in-person school attendance.

I have a question for the Minister on CLASS, which I welcome wholeheartedly. Does she believe the scheme will ensure that children whose education was disrupted by not being at in-person school classes will not fall through the cracks, and that those who have fallen through the cracks will be able to lift them back out of it and into school learning?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy. I appreciate his opening remarks. On CLASS, this is the third aspect of the support programme for children, as we have said previously. The important aspect of the CLASS initiative is that it is for the benefit of all students. There will be targeted teaching hours made available to schools. For example, a post-primary school of 800 pupils will be entitled to an additional 1,100 hours, which is 51 weeks. That amounts to a full year and a half of additional resources from a teaching point of view. A primary school of 200 pupils will be eligible for 15 weeks.

The important consideration is that what is being offered is twofold. In the first instance, the scheme will be for any student in any of the platforms that have lost out in terms of academic work or otherwise. Schools have the autonomy to decide upon that. The second aspect is that the scheme gives young people an opportunity to socialise, engage and team-build, and basically to have fun also. We are examining other creative measures, including sport, drama, poetry and artistic endeavours. They could very much be features of the programme in our schools also. Each school has the autonomy to decide how best to break up the hours. Whether it would be for team-teaching purposes, group teaching or individual teaching from an academic learning point of view or for the recreation and creative aspect, it is a two-pronged attack. It is acknowledging that students, when they are not in school and where they were not in school as a consequence of Covid, are now deserving of support and CLASS, from the middle of October, will be in a position to meet that. That is in conjunction with the other two aspects, which were they supplementary programme and the enhance summer provision which, this year, for the first time ever also, was open to all schools to apply. I hope that gives the Deputy a flavour of what we hope to achieve with it.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** I thank the Minister for that detailed response. It is a scheme that is very important and that should be widely used for the purposes of protecting those children who have suffered or fallen through the cracks.

Could I ask the Minister another question that is not on the issues it was intended to ask her about? One of the consequences if the pandemic is that we have seen, particularly this year, an increase in grade inflation when it came to the leaving certificate. In many respects, that is not of huge assistance to the students this year because the points third level have also risen. Are the Minister and the Minister of State concerned that students who are due to sit the leaving certificate next year may be at a disadvantage if it is the case that students who have achieved very high points this year decide to defer their college applications to next year?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** This past year and, indeed, the year previously were extraordinary, not only in terms of education but across society. It has been a significant achievement that this country was in a position to offer the class of 2021 the opportunity to participate in the accredited grades process but also take the written examinations or, indeed, opt for a combination of both. That was in recognition of the loss of 14 weeks of in-person teaching and learning for these students and of the significant adjustment made to examination papers as well. That was because of the remarkable position in which we found ourselves.

I am conscious that there will also be accommodations made for the current leaving certificate group, who will be the class of 2022 in terms of examination papers, recognising their loss of in-person tuition, not at the same level, we would hope, as that experienced by the class of 2021. This will be a different year again for students.

I acknowledge that this has been a particularly different year. We are looking forward to next year when we will have more of a normal experience of school life and living. For that reason, there will be some accommodations made in respect of the leaving certificate examination papers but we would hope that would be the height of it.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** It was a significant achievement that we were able to hold the leaving certificate examinations.

Finally, I welcome the Minister’s statement to the effect that there will be anti-bullying inspections in schools in quarters 3 and 4 of next year. Can she give any indication as to what that will involve? Is it to try to ensure that schools have in place procedures to deal with bullying and that those procedures will be listed in their charters?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** It is important to acknowledge in the first instance that excellent work is already being done in our schools. For example, this week the roll-out of the incidental inspections is taking place. An integral part of those inspections will be an opportunity to review best practice in our schools currently. Coming from that, there will be a composite report of all of that best practice which will, in turn, be disseminated to schools. It is a precursor to advising schools that, when we look towards 2022, all the variety of types of inspections will focus on the general climate and school culture. That is the best way to phrase the matter because it is about school culture, atmosphere and positivity. An integral part of that will be how issues of bullying are dealt with within the school.

Equally, as the Deputy stated, the school community charter, as I would hope there will be agreement to rename it now, makes provision for a buy-in from all of the stakeholders - parents, students, staff and everyone within the school community. Everyone will be well advised and will be part of the decision-making process. That happens in many of our schools currently. As I say, in terms of provision of policy, there is excellent practice. Where there might be shortcomings and where there is opportunity to do better, how we are progressing now in terms of the incidental inspections, and, indeed, the full inspections beginning next year will inform and



provide assistance for those who perhaps need to look at this area once again.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** I thank the Minister and the Chair.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for their presentations. There is a huge amount of ground to cover and I may be slightly scattergun in my approach.

In the first instance, I disagree with Deputy Ó Laoghaire’s characterisation of the return to school being chaotic. In my town of Tramore, the staff within schools, the entire school community and the children have been fantastic about getting themselves back to school and it has been very welcome. From the off, I would demur from that point of view.

I wanted to ask the Minister of State a question about summer provision. There is a great deal of frustration among many who have been working to provide summer provision about the length of time it takes to get paid. It was a factor that put many people off participating. I welcome the participation from the children’s point of view, but could the Minister of State comment on whether it was difficult to recruit staff into it and if there are any plans to speed up the process whereby people are paid for participation in those summer provision programmes?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** First, the Department will take any feedback from schools that have had a less than satisfactory experience regarding summer provision. As the Minister alluded to earlier, this year was the first year that all schools in the country could avail of it. What I know so far is that approximately 34,000 children participated in summer provision, which is a big increase on last year. Some of those forms are still coming in from parents. In the context of the Covid pandemic in particular and the risk of regression that we spoke about earlier, it provided much needed service to children with additional needs. It was also expanded this year so that there was from two weeks up to five in some instances. It was at the discretion of each school.

In terms of payment, participating schools should be paid in early course. If the Deputy had a particular experience with a school that has not been, he might let me know. We endeavour to pay as quickly as possible. In some instances, it can be difficult to do that. Most payments, I understand, were issued in August but if there were delays, they need to be addressed. The Deputy might let me know if there are instances in that regard.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** Many principals had difficulty recruiting into the provision despite the welcome extra funding made available.

On CLASS, I say “Well done” to whoever managed to work the name of the scheme into an acronym. I welcome that scheme. I was looking through the guidance documents and they are very good. It is comprehensive. The circular is good and the guidance documents are good. Something that would be worth emphasising, from the Minister’s point of view, would be the potential to allow experienced teachers to be the ones who step out and bring the substitute teachers into the classroom because, almost by definition, these will be the cohorts that are difficult to reach. Similar to summer provision, the concern that is coming back to me from principals is whether the substitute cover will be available in order for schools to be able to avail of CLASS. I ask the Minister to comment on whether she is confident that the number of substitute teachers will be available to fill those roles.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank Deputy Ó Cathasaigh. I appreciate the positive feedback.

I have had the opportunity to visit a number of schools over the past number of weeks. I share the Deputy's view that there has been a very positive reaction to the return to school. That is across the board - from parents and guardians, school staff and, very importantly, the students themselves.

In terms of class provision, opportunities to get replacement staff, etc., I acknowledge that significant work has been done to ensure that additional staff may be available. We have the traditional sources of staff being made available. For example, this year and last year work was done to make provision for those who were job-sharing and on career breaks, that their hours could be increased to make them available. That follows on from the point the Deputy made about experienced teachers who might be working fewer hours, who might be on career breaks or whatever. There is now a mechanism for them to come back into the system, and for job-sharers to increase their hours.

As a consequence of engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, provision is being made over a three-year period from last year to ensure that there will be no negative impact on retired staff in the context of their coming back. The Teaching Council continues to engage with those who are qualified and eligible. We are confident that significant progress has been made in this regard. Obviously, it is something that we will keep under on-going review. There has also been significant investment in substitution panels for our primary schools, and additional panels have been created this year. They worked superbly well last year. It has been one of the success stories, and I am pleased that we were in a position to continue that this year and to enhance it as well. A rounded approach has been taken to sourcing additional staff.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I thank the Minister. It must be acknowledged that the substitution provision has worked very well in schools this year.

**Chairman:** This is your last question, Deputy.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** The Minister has engaged very positively in the context of the report on bullying. There are, however, a couple of issues I would like to raise. I acknowledge the audit of the action plan on bullying. That is important and overdue. I also acknowledge the role of the inspectorate in terms of gathering data, but it is slightly at variance from the recommendation in the report, which was to establish a national system for the compilation of this disaggregated data, collation and measurement. This would be more in-depth and valuable thing if we could take it on and build on our experience of getting feedback from the inspectorate. I would like to see costings and a pilot programme in terms of those recommendations around psychologists located within schools for emotional counselling and therapeutic supports. Recommendation 8 relates to middle management positions. This goes to Covid-19 supports, bullying and so many things within schools. There has not been a restoration of middle management posts. We know that schools were affected differently according to their age profile. Is that something that the Minister will look at in the context of the budget?

**Chairman:** I thank Deputy Ó Cathasaigh. The Minister to respond, very briefly.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I appreciate and acknowledge the huge body of work that this committee has been involved in on bullying. The report was published just last month and I am in the process of working my way through it. I am very positively disposed towards working with many of the recommendations. Specifically, it is important to make a first step. That is why it will be a very positive learning experience in terms of the information that is gathered

by our inspectorate. From that will follow other steps. I have an absolute openness to looking at many of the steps that the committee advocates. To be fair, I think there will be a very positive learning experience from either the incidental inspection reports this year or indeed the full inspections next year.

In terms of Deputy's question on middle management, a total of 1,700 leadership posts have been invested in our primary schools since 2017. This has led to one in three of teachers in primary schools holding promoted positions. I want to acknowledge that. I also want to acknowledge that there is always opportunity to do more and to progress. We are conscious that we are coming into budget time. Significant progress has been made but there is always room to go further. I have a plethora of asks in terms of budget, and I will be pursuing as many as I can.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister. Next is Deputy Ó Ríordáin and he will be followed by Deputy Conway-Walsh.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** I am a bit taken aback by the attitude of Government speakers in particular. If any of the principals who have been in contact with are watching these deliberations, they will be pulling their hair out. Frankly, the return to school was a positive for many schools but there were individual school principals who had never contacted local representatives before in their lives but were forced to do so because of what they termed the shambles that they were dealing with earlier this month. I concede that not much of the responsibility fell at the doors of the Minister or the Minister of State. What happened was due to inaction on the part of the HSE and the inability of the public health teams to make timely interventions with schools. However, there were principals in contact with me who had no option other than to send home entire classes because three, four or five days passed without them hearing from the public health team.

One school of which I am aware has 24 classes and only three CO2 monitors. In addition, we did not get the situation on pregnant teachers sorted in time. We have the catch-up scheme which has been described as completely inadequate by Judith Harford and Brian Fleming in *The Irish Times*. The scheme does not compare in any way favourably with similar schemes throughout Europe. To return to what has been said previously about literacy camps, I have been contacted by two DEIS schools which indicated that are still waiting to be paid.

This sort of nothing-to-see-here attitude from Government is going to have to be checked because this level of complacency is part of the problem. I would suggest that none of us in Opposition parties have ramped up anxiety or tried to play to a gallery in trying to make people feel as though schools are unsafe. We have been trying to do the right thing. I would also suggest however that if the Government is not hearing what we are hearing, then maybe it is not listening as we are. We can only reflect back what is being said to us.

I take this opportunity to ask again about the interaction between the Department and NPHET. Regulations relating to pregnant teachers changed. Regardless of whether that was completely coincidental because the matter was in the public arena or not, they did change. I would be interested in the Minister's reaction particularly to the situation relating to CO2 monitors and to the time gap which is leading principals being placed in completely impossible situations in some circumstances whereby they can nothing other than deal with problems relating to Covid and individual Covid cases.

When is the citizens' assembly on education going to be established? We speak of anti-bullying, but we still have a situation where 90% of our schools are under the patronage of an

institution that thinks homosexual acts are acts of grave depravity. Yet, we are supposed to be serious about tackling homophobic and transgender bullying in schools. I would think that the citizens' assembly on education should tackle that issue.

I also wish to ask about the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill. Almost 12 months have elapsed since I brought an amendment to the House in order to delete the ridiculous provision within that Bill, which was put in at the behest of the private fee-paying school sector, to give schools the opportunity to have 25% of their enrolments set aside for children and grandchildren of past pupils. The Minister said at the time of the introduction of my amendment to delete that provision, that she would come back within 12 months. Those 12 months will be up in the first week of November. What work has been done on that?

As I have the Minister's attention, there is a second level Gaelscoil in my constituency - Gaelcholáiste Reachrann - that really needs her urgent attention. I have written to the Minister and the Taoiseach about this matter and I raised the matter with the Tánaiste last week. I believe the Minister is familiar with the school, which is Donaghmede, Dublin 13. It absolutely needs urgent attention from her and her Department.

Will the Minister address, in the short time I have allowed her, the position in schools? Could we get the literacy camps paid for? Does the Minister know when the citizens' assembly on education will be established? What is the story on the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill?

**Chairman:** The Minister has approximately one minute to respond.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** In the first instance, I take exception to the remarks about complacency in our schools. There is nothing complacent about our return to school. As I have said, we have consistently engaged right throughout the summer and put funding in place of €57 million alone for this first term for the return to school. There is no sense of complacency and, in contrast, there is a sense that a high priority is being put on everything we deliver in the education sector.

I accept there will always be issues such as glitches and pinch points. I acknowledge the Deputy's graciousness in saying the pinch points did not fall within our remit but where there was an issue, the HSE came on board to provide additional resources. It would be unfair to classify our approach as complacent and, if anything, it is a matter of high priority with absolute determination to provide the additional resources and everything else needed for our schools.

It is not just the class programme. There have been three phases and with the enhanced summer provision programme it was my pleasure to have Gavin Williamson from the UK, who attended one of these enhanced summer provision programmes and was much taken by initiatives that are not seen in other jurisdictions.

The Department and I are fully committed to progressing the citizens' assembly. The Deputy will appreciate that it is run from the Department of the Taoiseach and there are a number of assemblies that are to be run. My Department is currently doing initial work in that respect but we are very keen to move that along as quickly as possible.

I have been very clear that we had to allow the process with regard to the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill to run and see how it was working. When the time is opportune, we will review it.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Minister and Minister of State for their presentations. At this stage, I suppose, many queries have already been answered. I will ask the Minister about flexibility in terms of school numbers. I can give a case in point around a DEIS school in Fahy in Westport. They have seen numbers increase immensely in the past few years and the school currently has 114 pupils on the roll. That will guarantee the school the appointment of a new teacher next year. However, there has been an unexpected large number of new entrants this year, with the result that it now has 36 pupils in junior and senior infants, with 31 pupils in first and second class. We are still in the midst of a pandemic and trying to make schools as safe as possible. I ask, therefore, that such cases could be looked at to see if we can address those positions of having 36 pupils or 31 pupils in the same classrooms, with teachers trying to manage them. Some flexibility around that would be really good.

I very much welcome the statement around the additional administrative leave days for principals. How are the decisions made around that to provide for substitution arrangements? How is it decided?

We clearly need more teachers to meet the demand we have but we have seen that the CAO points for primary teaching are now as high as 522, largely because of the cap on undergraduate places. The reason given previously for this cap was to control supply but what happens in reality if students are pushed to the master's degree courses that are predominantly in one very expensive private college that now trains approximately half the teachers? I will ask the committee to look at this but when will the Minister sign off on the intake figures for the 2022-23 academic year? I know this is something that certainly needs changing. I have a number of other questions but I realise I have very limited time. Will the Minister address those two questions first?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy. She raised a case involving high class numbers at primary school level but pupil-teacher ratios, as a consequence of work done in previous budgets, are at an historic low. I am not *au fait* with the specific case raised by the Deputy but, in general, where there are exceptional positions in schools or whatever, there is an appeals process for teacher allocations. It is very clear in the publication of a circular with the necessary criteria. That opportunity exists for all schools in exceptional circumstances.

There was a question on how the allocation is made for the administrative principals. That has been embraced by schools principal and the process worked particularly well last year. I was extremely pleased I was in a position to ensure it could follow through this year. It works with schools forming a cluster, agreeing among themselves where a substitute would be based and how days would be allocated or used throughout the cluster. That has been the experience last year and continuing into this year. There is an agreement around the release days suiting principals within the cluster and there must be engagement, agreement and negotiation in that regard.

The Deputy's final point concerned the elevated points for primary school teaching. We do not have control over the points aspect and that varies from year to year. That is the nature of the system. I know this can be difficult and particularly demanding for students who wish to pursue a particular pathway. There is other work done on place allocation and caps, which will be done in due course. I cannot give specific dates but I am happy to keep the Deputy updated on the process.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** This is a really important matter. Inflated grades this year have led to a lottery system being used in the allocation of places. Has provision been made

to ensure that this will not happen again? Leaving certificate students are thinking that even if they make the maximum effort and get maximum points, they are still not guaranteed the place they want. I know the Minister agrees that this is desperately unjust and something we cannot stand over.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I know from experience that the day of leaving certificate results can bring great joy for some and great disappointment for others. The day the course points are published can also bring great joy and disappointment as well. I have already outlined that this past year and the previous year have been extraordinary and that extraordinary circumstances prevailed. The class of 2021 had an achievement in managing to sit a leaving certificate process involving accredited grades and a written exam. It was an extraordinary and unprecedented measure, almost unique in the world. It was important that they would have it. I am very proud that schools and staff facilitated it and that students engaged with it. Notwithstanding that, next year will be different. I am mindful, as I said previously, that the class of 2022, as it will be, also endured a lack of in-person teaching and learning. Accommodations are being made for the class of 2022 in the context of examination papers, etc., in order that they will have a similar accommodation. We hope that that will be the limit of the experience of school closures and of this issue going forward.

I do not have control over the CAO points system. We are working towards a return to our schools with accommodations made for previous absence but with a return, as normal as is possible, going forward for students.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I thank the Minister. Next is Senator Dolan. She will be followed by Senator O'Loughlin.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** Senator Dolan is in the Chamber-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** She did, in fact, mention something in that regard. I call Senator O'Loughlin.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I thank the Minister and Minister of State for attending. I apologise that I could not be here earlier. I was taking part in an important debate on bullying and harassment in third level institutions in the Seanad.

I commend all of the work that has been done throughout the country to get schools open, which was a significant and important priority for the Minister. There was a level of unprecedented funding devoted to getting the schools open. There are always going to be difficulties and challenges that arise and we are never sure they are going to be challenges until they do arise. As they crop up, it is important that they are dealt with quickly and decisively. One comment that a principal made to me was on the possible use of a living document that could be changed and adapted in the context of dealing with the pandemic, as opposed to circulars coming out all the time. Such a development might work very well.

I got to hear some of the debate on the Cork Life Centre and I was very interested in the work that it did previously. I appreciate that the Minister is trying to find a solution now. There has to be scope for similar types of education programmes around the country. Are there any plans for that?

The report on school bullying - as the Minister will be aware the committee held eight different sessions to discuss that subject - is a extremely important. When people's lives are being impacted very negatively, with, at times, long-term consequences, it was very important area

that we made a large number of recommendations, namely, 25. I had the opportunity to read the part of the Minister's opening statement in which comment was made on some of the recommendations. The making available of emotional counselling and the therapeutic supports for every school is a key recommendation we made. Is there something in this that could be delivered?

As an aside, there was a very sad situation in a school in my area last week whereby a young girl in sixth class died from cancer only two weeks after she was diagnosed. I spoke to the class teacher last week who informed me that NEPS was fantastic and that it helped in a very significant way. This was her first, and hopefully her last, time to ever have to experience something like this within a class. She thought the service was excellent and I felt it was important to make a note of that and of how we support our young people through what life throws at them. To have those emotional and therapeutic supports available would be very good.

I also want to ask about the possibility of the FUSE programme being rolled out and about the Roots of Empathy programme from Barnardos? As we are talking about bullying and promoting positive mental health, this is very important. I know that the Minister has been doing a good deal of work through the Bringing Live Arts to Students and Teachers, BLAST, programme in the arts within and outside the school community. Can the Minister also talk to us a little bit about those programmes as well, please?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Senator and acknowledge the various points she has raised. There has been significant progress on the Cork Life Centre and I acknowledge the work of the officials of the Department, the Cork Education and Training Board and the Cork Life Centre, which has engaged so positively and proactively in being able to progress matters.

On the Senator's specific question on other types of schools and moving forward in the provision of same, the out-of-school provision report is nearing completion. It is significant that this is the first time ever that there has been an acknowledgement of education centres of this type and of out-of-school provision. That must be looked at with a recognition that not one type of schooling suits every child, which I fully accept. The report, which will inform our thinking into the future, will involve close engagement across the education sector. That engagement will include students and tutors who are currently involved in provision such as those in the Cork Life Centre. When we have that comprehensive body of work done, it will inform opportunities going forward.

On emotional counselling, I thank the Senator for her comments. Ms Tansey from NEPS is here with me. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the very positive commentary in respect of NEPS. Since becoming Minister, I have been very conscious of the importance of well-being within our schools. I reiterate what I said earlier on that. There is excellent work going on in our schools in the context of well-being and even in respect of the return to and reopening of schools. A very definite well-being approach was taken to welcoming back students, staff, school communities, etc. There is always a need for additional support, however. It was for this reason I ensured that, in the context of budget 2021, we would have 120 additional guidance counsellors and 17 NEPS positions made available to support the work to which the Senator alluded.

The Senator referred to therapeutic counselling. That is generally provided within the community and may not necessarily fall within my Department's remit. I acknowledge, however, that there is significant cross-departmental work going on between the Departments of Health and Education. The work of the Department of Health is rooted in the community but, as I said

earlier, I am currently working with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, to look at an how we might be able to support each other and to support, most importantly, our students and school communities. I am hoping in the not too distant future to be in a position to come back with something that has been worked through with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who has responsibility for mental health and well-being, her Department and the Department of Education.

I acknowledge the significant well-being supports that are available in our schools. We are now rolling out extensive CPD support for schools. Equally, there will be a platform available to schools with all of the well-being resources being made available. There are significant programmes already being run in schools, such as the Friends programmes at primary level and the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management programme at second level.

Earlier, I commended the enormous body of work the committee did in the context of the report it brought forward-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I will be very happy to keep an open mind and study many of the recommendations it contains.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I thank the Minister again. I call on Senator O'Reilly and thank her for joining us

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** I thank the Acting Chairman. I welcome the Minister and the Minister of State and the staff members who are in attendance today.

I commend both Ministers, in the first instance, on their work. I have been pleasantly surprised by some of the alternative ways of thinking on display. The Minister spoke quite eloquently in acknowledging the work of Cork Life Centre, the management of which, on the basis of the contact I had with them previously, were probably quite frustrated. She also referred to acknowledging that not all children learn in the same way and that we need to look at different ways of educating young people.

The work that our committee did in preparing its report on bullying shows that children have different experiences of school and that identity very much comes into it when people are bullied. That is evidenced by much of the research referenced in the report. So many witnesses came before us to discuss the issue. There were common themes. We absolutely have to consider therapeutic services, but also the reasons for the experiences children are having. Some really interesting things came out of that. I know the Minister has read the report, and I thank her for that. What kind of funding can be put in place in this regard? What came out loud and clear is that teaching staff need support in implementing some of the suggestions and recommendations we put forward. I am also a member of the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community. We did some training that involved acknowledging our own biases. That is an important part of the work of teaching staff as well when it comes to identity because, as we have to acknowledge, there is not significant diversity among such staff. We have excellent teachers but we need training across the board to ensure that everybody is acknowledging where they come from in society and how to interact with people from diverse backgrounds.

I had to leave the meeting earlier because I had Internet access problems. However, I heard the Minister say that she was considering changes to the student and parent charter. I very much



welcome that. Even a renaming of the charter would be an acknowledgement that schools are communities made up of students, parents and teachers, but also the wider community. Would she consider putting in amendments relating to guidelines on arrangements to be made by schools for those who may not wish to take religious instruction, for instance? I know it is referenced in existing legislation but, in the context of the guidelines themselves, schools are implementing things differently. It is an important part of the overall picture. It may be worth considering a survey of parents to see what it is they are expecting and whether they want religious training or religious instruction for their children rather than having to opt out. Opting out can be a cause of bullying, in and of itself, which goes back to the point on identity. Those are a couple of specific issues relating to funding and religious instruction.

The Minister will be aware that I am a former chair of Home Education Network Ireland and have been in touch with many families that take their children out of school because of trauma. It is important to recognise that. Some families do so for ideological reasons but there are many people who do it because of school trauma. As such, the work the Minister is doing in respect of other kinds of provision is really important to address that issue and ensure it is a matter of choice. It also means that people have the choice to have an education in school where appropriate and not feel traumatised by it. I welcome that and I really look forward to hearing more on the subject.

A significant point relating to children going back to school is that many of them do not have access to lockers. It may seem like a small issue but it is actually quite a major one for my children, who have been in school since I became a Senator, in the context of carrying heavy schoolbags. Some schools seem to be providing lockers. Are there specific guidelines in that regard? Having to carry a heavy schoolbag means children do not cycle or walk and that more of them travel to school in cars, which also has a climate impact.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Senator. I appreciate the points she has made. I will start with her final point. As regards lockers, I am very familiar with how that works and I absolutely appreciate how students and families are being discommoded in that respect. This was done in the context of Covid to ensure there was a minimisation of students circulating within schools and moving from classrooms to lockers to change books and so on. Obviously, as we move beyond the Covid environment, everything will be considered and reviewed. However, we are very conscious that, this year, we retained all of the infection mitigation, prevention and control measures that were in existence last year, as well as the best practice advice that was given to us in terms of operation within our schools. Notwithstanding what may be happening in wider society, it has been a particularly important element of safety within schools that we have had relatively stringent infection prevention and control measures and guidance of that nature. It has very much worked in our favour. However, I absolutely take the point made by the Senator regarding parents and students and so on. I hope that we are moving in a more positive direction. Everything will be kept under review as we move forward.

As regards the school community charter, I am keen to progress it. This will be coming to committee, including amendments to rename the charter. At the core of this matter is that we seek to operate within a community in schools. For that reason, I am proposing that it will be known as the school community charter. Obviously, there will be opportunities for further discussion, debate and engagement on a variety of issues, including those raised by the Senator, at the committee and elsewhere. I am keen to facilitate the widest debate, discussion and engagement on it and I will welcome that. The richness of the discussion will be enhanced by more engagement from the widest cohort of people. I look forward to that.

As regards well-being and measures of that nature within schools, I referenced earlier the very strong well-being approach being taken within schools. This year, we will have a national roll-out of CPD in terms of implementation of the well-being policy from the Department. The Professional Development Service for Teachers, PDST, will be responsible for that and for supporting schools. I am clear that well-being in school is not the preserve of one individual; it must be shared. I know from experience that it is shared across all the school community and staff. It is not just the job of guidance counsellors; it is very much at the heart and the core of the role of language teachers or science teachers, while in primary schools it is very much at the core of the role of teachers, special needs assistants and school management. Across all primary and secondary schools, everybody is invested in well-being. I acknowledge that. There will be a significant roll-out of training support.

As already stated, specific provision was made in budget 2021 for an additional 120 guidance counsellors and an 17 NEPS psychologists. I am very conscious that, from the point of view of the Department of Health, many of the resources are within the community. I am currently working with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, to consider a joint approach through which there may be an opportunity for us to look at measures we might be able to work on within the school format, acknowledging the excellent interdepartmental co-operation between the Departments of Education and Health. That has always been the case and we continue to develop and grow that co-ordination. There is an opportunity with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and her specific portfolio in terms of well-being and mental health.

**Chairman:** Senator O'Reilly was the final contributor. I have a follow-up question for the Minister regarding the junior and leaving certificates and pupils who may be self-isolating, for whatever reason, during the examination process. Is it her intention to retain the repeat function on the basis of students either self-isolating or having contracted Covid during the examination period?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Chairman. We will look at all of the positives we have learned from Covid and all of the measures we implemented during the pandemic. It is my intention that we look at all of that information. We will also look at the potential of any measures we are in a position to implement, that have been of benefit to our school communities and our students in particular. That is part of a wider discussion and analysis of all that has been implemented during Covid. It is certainly my hope and expectation. I will finish on an optimistic note by saying that we hope we are looking at a post-Covid period rather than continuing to journey through Covid, especially as we look towards next year. We will be looking at where there are lessons to be learned.

**Chairman:** Given the nature of Covid-19 and its status in law, a pupil would be legally required to remove himself or herself from the classroom if he or she contracted Covid and would not, therefore, be able to sit the examination. Under that legal classification, a pupil is required not to be present and, therefore, a provision might be made as was done this year. I do not think that status will change, regardless of the status of the pandemic. This virus is now endemic. We are dealing with it for good. That is worth noting.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** We are in a very different scenario now than we were then because we have the vaccines. Between 86% and 87% of our students over the age of 12 have been vaccinated.

**Chairman:** I understand. However, vaccination status does not change the requirement for a person to legally exclude himself or herself. That is the nature of this virus. That status may

change, which is a matter for HSE and NPHE. At present, the pupil would be legally required to remove himself or herself and that is why I ask about the potential to resit the examination. The Minister and her officials had the foresight to have separate or replacement papers this year. If that has already occurred, the Minister might consider doing it again in the future. I am not asking her to make a call on it now.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I make the point on vaccination because we are in a situation in which you do not have to isolate if you are vaccinated. I appreciate the point the Acting Chair makes, however. We will be looking at all of the measures, with a view to learning from them and seeing what potential we have going forward.

**Chairman:** I appreciate that.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** My apologies. We had a motion in the Seanad and I had to step away for part of the meeting. I welcome the Minister and the Minister of State.

It is wonderful to hear about the extra supports being put in place, especially CLASS. It is a great acronym. That is €50 million for additional teaching supports. I apologise, as the Minister or Minister of State may have already commented on some of the matters about which I am going to ask. The Minister mentioned that the supports are dependent on the size of the school involved. I come from a rural area and some of our primary schools are smaller. We have some large schools as well, but we should be conscious that those supports are evenly distributed and that account is taken of the size of and numbers in the relevant school. There is also the fact we would like to reach every school. The Minister's constituency is on the smaller as well.

My other question is about the hot school meals programme. I thank the Acting Chair for the latitude and time he has afforded me. I know that he and the Chairman raised this matter earlier. The Minister may have replied to their questions already. Is there a system within the Department of Education for reviewing and approving certain schools? I am looking at this matter specifically in the context of DEIS. For example, DEIS band 1 schools can access hot school meals. In order to increase the number of DEIS schools, however, I understand that the position has to be reviewed. I am aware that a more general policy for schools is under consideration but I am interested in discovering how we will be identifying schools in need. Many schools have been in need in the past year or two. We should have follow-on supports at post-primary level for students who attended DEIS band 1 schools.

I thank the Minister for her assistance regarding the provision of additional accommodation in my area. St. Teresa's Special School has been approved for additional accommodation. I do not know if Mr. Hubert Loftus is still with us, but I would like to know if there is a timeline in respect of capital infrastructure provision. I understand that we have taken measures to accelerate it as much as possible. Also on capital infrastructure, we have spoken about the Scoil an Chroí Naofa project many times. The project relating to the school has been in train for 25 years, which is a long time, and remains at stage 2b. A great deal of work has been done by the planning team, the Department and the school on moving this project beyond stage 2b and to get an application for planning submitted to Galway County Council. Perhaps Mr. Loftus or someone else might be able to provide an update. If not, I would really appreciate it if a written update could be provided.

I thank the Minister and Minister for State for what they have achieved in the past year in the context of children with special needs and inclusion. I also sit on the Joint Sub-Committee on Mental Health. The Minister mentioned mental health supports for children in primary and

post-primary schools. The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Butler, was mentioned. She is crucial to this because she has responsibility for the area of mental health. With regard the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, who is responsible for public health, the healthy counties initiative being rolled out through the local authorities might also be something to support, with an integrated roll-out in our schools and local communities in order to have as much an impact as possible.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I acknowledge and appreciate the Senator's remarks on CLASS. I come from a rural constituency. I am an enormous fan of the smaller rural schools, as I am of all schools, but I appreciate the widest experience of education, which is in the smaller and larger schools. We were very clear in the manner in which we laid out the supports for the schools that it would be weighted in terms of the size. Obviously, the resources required by a smaller school would be less than those required by a larger school. Notwithstanding that, those resources are being made available. In addition, other initiatives such as BLAST, which brings live arts into the schools, is available to all schools irrespective of size. That also fits in very nicely with the CLASS Covid learning supports programme. The enormous issue for us is that we are very keen there would be an emphasis on teaching and learning in this programme, from an academic point of view, but also the widest experience of socialisation, integration, resilience and team-building. That is why we are also looking at making sport, creativity, drama, poetry, or whatever it might be available in schools. Each school has the autonomy to identify it for itself.

The DEIS model, as Senator Dolan is aware, is being examined with a view to developing a new statistics-based model that will identify schools that are most in need. The detailed quality analysis has been completed by the DEIS technical group and the Department is now engaging with the education partners. The work needs to transact, but it is ongoing. Hot school meals come within the remit of the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys. I acknowledge the positive manner in which she engages with the Department of Education on that. I will continue to engage with her going forward.

In terms of the cross-departmental approach that we take on a number of different issues, I acknowledge the efforts of the Ministers of State, Deputies Butler and Feighan. I am happy to work in the widest possible way in order to that schools may benefit I am open to doing that.

I do not have information to hand on the specific projects to which the Senator referred. I will discuss the matter with Mr. Loftus and we will ensure that the Senator gets a written reply on the two issues she raised.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** The CLASS Covid scheme will be of great assistance to children with additional needs and, as the Minister said, it will help with well-being. I thank the Senator for her acknowledgment of that. As for the additional accommodation scheme for the school in her area, namely, St. Teresa's Special School, I wish it the best of luck with that.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I thank the Minister of State. It has been crucial. As she will be aware, the number of special schools in the country is very low, at perhaps 150. It is crucial, therefore, that we support them. I thank her for all her efforts in that area. Some schools will be delighted by the policies the Government is bringing forward in respect of reduced timetables in order that they will be better managed, with better communication with families.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister, the Minister of State and their officials.

The joint committee adjourned at 6.31 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 28 September 2021.