



Submission to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response June 2020

1. Introduction

Educate Together is the representative body for 116 equality-based schools in Ireland. A registered charity, Educate Together is the management body for 92 national schools and patron (or patron/trustee partner) of 17 post-primary schools, which include voluntary secondary schools, community schools and community colleges. This includes 5 new schools which we are opening this September in Cork and Dublin (3 primary and 2 voluntary secondary schools).

As the management body for the fastest-growing sector of primary schools, Educate Together is committed to working closely with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and other partners to ensure the smooth running of the primary education system. As an equality-based school patron across primary and post-primary level, we teach a comprehensive Ethical Education curriculum, and we strive to ensure that every one of the 30,000 children and young people in our schools is supported to achieve their full potential. We are also working to increase access to Educate Together schools in order to meet the rapidly increasing demand for equality-based education, in line with government policy.

Since Covid 19 first impacted on the school system Ireland in March, Educate Together has worked intensively with schools and with the DES and partners to support continuity of learning for all students. Some examples of the ways Educate Together schools have adapted to this change can be seen [here](#).

Educate Together is aware that other organisations are also preparing comprehensive submissions to the Special Committee on the broad range of issues facing schools as we plan together to reopen our school buildings in September. Our work with partners over the past three months suggests that there is broad agreement on the main issues facing schools at this time, and in the interests of efficiency, we do not intend to repeat the points made by others here. Instead our submission aims to draw the committee's attention to the particular situation of **new and developing schools**, which, because of the rapid growth in Educate Together provision in recent years, form a large proportion of our network.

Educate Together

Equity House,
16/17 Upper Ormond Quay, Dublin 7
D07 H7DE
T +353 1 4292500
E info@educatetogether.ie
www.educatetogether.ie
20033309

Directors 2020 – 2021

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2. Summary

1. There is an urgent need for clear and detailed health-led guidance from the Department of Education and Skills in relation to health and safety, cleaning and other requirements for all schools, so that management bodies, schools boards of management and principals can plan effectively to reopen school buildings.
2. Considerable additional funding will be required for all schools to meet the costs of additional cleaning, training and equipment that will be required in order to ensure a safe, well-managed return to school. This funding cannot be taken from the already stretched education budget, but must be provided from central emergency funds.
3. Voluntary boards of management need access to specialist health and safety expertise, as well as state indemnity against potential Covid 19 personal injury or other related claims.
4. New and developing schools will need additional teaching posts on a one-off basis to enable principals to manage the complex health and safety, logistical, HR, accommodation, communications and other challenges that are involved in reopening buildings and keeping children and staff safe.
5. Additional accommodation required by new and developing schools this year must be confirmed urgently, and must be fit for purpose and located in the community the school is designed to serve.

3. Vulnerable students

As an equality-based patron, Educate Together is very conscious of international research that shows that school closures impact disproportionately on students from disadvantaged backgrounds¹ and in our response to Covid 19, our primary focus is on ensuring that the most vulnerable students are supported.

In a survey conducted among Educate Together schools in April 2020, the majority of principals indicated particular concerns about the wellbeing of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students with English as an additional language (EAL) and those with other additional education needs. Already in April, 93% of Educate Together schools had put additional supports in place for children with additional needs, but concerns remained, including those relating to learning engagement and teacher distance learning capacity (especially at primary level).

Although 74% of Educate Together schools had already put additional supports in place for disadvantaged students in April, principals identified issues with distribution of school meals and student access to devices and broadband. While good progress has been made since, a significant concern remains for a minority of students who were already at risk of poor

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences>

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attendance and early school leaving that may have become further disengaged with school and will find it more difficult to re-engage in learning in the coming school year.

- **The longer schools remain closed, the greater the risks for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For these students in particular, Educate Together is extremely concerned to ensure the necessary supports are in place to reopen school buildings as soon as it is safe to do so.**

Educate Together is proud to have a strong reputation as an inclusive school network, welcoming students from a range of backgrounds and supporting every child to reach their full potential, whatever their educational needs. Educate Together national schools have a higher proportion of specialist Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) classes than other sectors (43% compared to 10% national average) and research conducted by the ESRI last year showed a higher proportion of students with additional needs in our post-primary schools than the national average².

Educate Together has identified issues with the new model of allocating Special Education Teachers (SETs) that was introduced in 2017. While the principles underlying this new model – a basic allocation for all schools – are to be welcomed, the way that allocations are calculated, based on student numbers in previous years, is not suitable for developing schools and serious issues have developed in the past two years which have left developing schools seriously under-resourced.

We have been sharing data with the DES to highlight this unintended consequence of the new model in recent weeks and months, and we have stressed the need to adapt the model for the specific case of developing schools. We hope that this will happen in the future, but in the meantime developing schools (not just Educate Together schools, but all developing schools) are facing into this extraordinary school year, when many students with additional needs will need particular specialised support to reintegrate into school life, with significant deficits in their Special Education Teacher (SET) allocation.

Given these deficits and the additional pressures on school management already identified:

- **There is an urgent need for additional SET teacher allocation for this September for all developing schools. Without this, these schools will not be able to meet the needs of this vulnerable group of students.**

4. Teacher allocation in new and developing schools

While the challenges of adapting the physical environment in the light of Covid 19 are considerable for all schools planning for reopening, these are compounded for schools in temporary accommodation. Educate Together is opening the following new schools this September:

² '15.7% of (ETSS) students indicated they have a special need or disability and 22.2% of students indicated they received extra help with school subjects in the last 12 months. It is likely that these numbers are an underestimation of the level of need at ETSSs, as some school leaders and teachers suggested the level of need at their school is higher than 30% of the student body. By comparison, 13% of 13-year-olds in the child cohort of the GUI indicated they received extra help in some subjects in the last 12 months'. (ESRI 2020, forthcoming)

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1. Owenabue Educate Together NS (Carrigaline, Cork)
2. Rathcoole Educate Together NS (Rathcoole, Dublin)
3. Cherrywood Educate Together NS (Cherrywood, Dublin)
4. Goatstown Educate Together Secondary School (Goatstown, Dublin)
5. Harolds Cross Educate Together Secondary School (Harolds Cross, Dublin)

We are working with the Planning and Building section to try to ensure that accommodation is in place for these schools in September. However, as yet none of the schools has its accommodation in place.

Current policy on the allocation of staff to new schools is completely inadequate, even under normal circumstances. At primary level, for example, unless the school enrolls more than 17 pupils immediately, the principal of a start-up school is expected to teach - and support the integration into school life of - junior infants with a range of needs, while simultaneously managing the complex logistics, buildings issues, procurement, recruitment, communications and community relations involved in establishing a new school. (see [circular 0018/2020](#))

There is always some uncertainty around exactly how many of the junior infants enrolled in a new school will appear in September. This year that uncertainty is considerably greater, given that families have not had an opportunity to meet the newly appointed principals face-to-face and accommodation for the schools is unlikely to be accessible until the very last minute.

In the context of Covid 19, it is also likely that some families will choose to delay the child's school start to the following year. These decisions may only be taken in August or September when there is greater clarity in relation to the arrangements for the reopening of schools to children. All of this means that it is possible that fewer junior infants will actually start school in September than would be the case were it not for Covid 19.

The current health situation also brings additional concerns for the principals and school managers of new schools – at primary and post-primary level. These are likely to include:

1. Additional cleaning requirements during the school day,
2. Organisation of pupils into smaller groups,
3. Establishment of distance learning capacity in the new school,
4. Increased anxiety among children and parents,
5. Supervision needs in the event of staggered opening times / limitations on building access for parents / illness or symptoms requiring isolation on the part of a principal / child,
6. Erratic attendance or absence up to September 30th due to health or other issues,
7. Managing these issues in temporary accommodation, access arrangements for which are not yet confirmed.

All of this means that it will be impossible for the principal of a new school to teach newly arriving students while also managing the school. Educate Together, jointly with An Foras Pátrúnachta, have therefore requested that an exception be made in relation to the appointment of the first mainstream teacher in new primary schools, which would permit all of these new schools to appoint their first mainstream teacher, regardless of whether they can confirm that there will be the minimum number of junior infants enrolled on 30th September.

Similarly, new second-level schools will need additional teacher allocation this year to manage these additional requirements.

Developing schools are also placed in impossible situations in relation to their teacher allocation. In Newtownmountkennedy ETNS in Wicklow, for example, which opened in September 2019, the principal is facing the possibility that she will have to teach a mixed

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group of 23 junior and senior infants on her own, without a mainstream teacher or any other adult on the premises, while also managing the implementation of necessary Covid 19 measures. And all of this in temporary accommodation, and without an established school community to draw on for support. Even without the additional risk of staff illness, it is difficult to see how a voluntary board of management can ensure the safety of young children under these circumstances.

These schools are being opened in areas where additional capacity is needed because of population growth. We have no doubt that these schools will grow to reach their full capacity within the normal 6 / 8 year timeframe, once the particular challenges posed by Covid 19 have passed. This is not a question of allocating additional resources – rather a question of bringing forward resources which are already allocated.

- **New and developing schools will need additional teacher allocation this year so that principals can manage the complex challenges and requirements presented by Covid 19**

5. Schools in temporary accommodation

In addition to the 5 new schools it is opening this year, Educate Together has opened 21 new schools in the past 3 years (11 primary and 10 post-primary schools). Despite the fact that these schools have mostly been opened in areas of rapid demographic growth, where the need for new school buildings was apparent for some time, none of these schools is yet in its permanent building. The challenges of managing a school in temporary accommodation are many and complex (see [here](#) for more information). With particular reference to the new challenges now presented by Covid 19, these can include:

1. Small classrooms and/or circulation spaces,
2. Lack of suitable hygiene facilities (including access to toilets and water for handwashing),
3. Lack of general purpose, play areas, specialist facilities, resource rooms and/or staff room spaces,
4. Sharing facilities with other entities,
5. Necessity of moving during the school year and/or operating in more than one location,
6. Uncertainty leading to inability to plan effectively.

Educate Together is currently working intensively with the DES and local communities to identify solutions in relation to 21 new and developing schools with urgent need of additional accommodation for this August / September. While there are always challenges at this time of year to ensure schools' accommodation needs are met, these have been exacerbated by Covid 19 because of:

1. Delays in construction and provision of pre-fabs
2. Inability of existing schools with surplus space to commit to accommodating new / developing schools because of uncertainty relating to Covid 19

Educate Together regularly advocates for earlier planning in relation to school accommodation so that new schools can open in suitable accommodation on their permanent sites in their local communities, and we hope that the next and future governments will strive to make

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improvements in this area. Particular concerns this year are that last-minute solutions may be suggested that involve:

1. Below standard accommodation,
2. Insufficient space,
3. Transporting students out of their communities.

While this is not advisable under any circumstances for environmental and community reasons, this year such solutions must be ruled out because of the probable impossibility of bus transport.

- **Accommodation must be provided urgently for new and developing schools that is fit for purpose and located in the community the school is designed to serve.**

6. Conclusion

Educate Together thanks the committee for the opportunity to make a submission at this time. The challenges involved in reopening school buildings are many and complex and Educate Together is working intensively with all stakeholders to ensure that schools can open safely. This is vital for our most vulnerable students and families at this time.

School management bodies, principals and board of management are in urgent need of considerable financial and other supports, as well as reassurance and state indemnity. In addition, new and developing schools will require additional consideration and teacher allocation. We hope that the committee can assist in ensuring that these supports are forthcoming.

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