

## Memo on School Reopening – Primary Management Bodies

16 July 2020

All of the Management Bodies are committed to working with the Department of Education towards a full reopening of primary schools in the Autumn.

The Management Bodies welcome the fact that the Department has committed to providing;

1. The Guidance needed to support full school reopening including;
  - a. School COVID-19 Plan
  - b. The necessary check lists and templates to support reopening
  - c. Draft additions to the School Safety Statement
  - d. Lead Worker Role Description
  - e. Illustrative plans for classrooms operating a social distancing regime in either class bubbles or smaller pods.
2. Grant Funding for Enhanced Cleaning
3. Grant Funding for the purchase of PPE and Hand Sanitiser through a framework Agreement.

The Management Bodies further welcome the fact that the Department has indicated that (subject to confirmation with DPER);

1. The first uncertified sick day will now be substitutable
2. EPV days will not be taken in the first term, and at least one of any EPV days granted after that will be substitutable
3. All teaching principals will have a minimum of one day a week substitutable Admin day
4. Administrative Principals will be provided with matching supports.
5. Supply panels will be extended (and need to include panels to cater for Irish medium and special schools)

However the Management Bodies are concerned that;

1. Additional release time will be required for all principals to introduce the necessary measures and manage the additional tasks and responsibilities required to keep schools open. These include: additional policy development and implementation; management and oversight of additional cleaning, additional human resources management (return to work forms, medmark referrals, etc); management of substitute teachers; adapting the physical environment to facilitate social distancing; procurement and distribution of additional cleaning and other equipment on the school premises; management of distance learning for students unable to come to school; additional supervision resulting from pod / bubble management, staggered drop offs and/or break times; additional communication with staff, parents and board members; adapting to changes in government advice; and preparation for potential further buildings closures.

2. There is still a great deal of detailed guidance needed for schools if they are to reopen in September. More detailed guidance must issue before the end of July, in English and Irish simultaneously. **Appendix One** has a list of illustrative questions which Boards of Management need answers to urgently.
3. No clarity has been provided as to the scale and nature of the support for enhanced cleaning – schools need to know urgently if it will enable the employment of contract cleaning companies, or whether they will need to go through a procurement process to hire a company.
4. Schools also need to know what should happen if existing ancillary staff cannot work due to being in the ‘very high risk’ category. School principals will need additional time and HR support to deal with these issues.
5. No clarity has been provided in terms of the grant aid for PPE/Hand Sanitiser or the process for schools to access the drawdown contract.
6. No mention has been made of increasing the Ancillary Grant to cover the reconfiguration of class rooms and schools to support social distancing, nor has clarity been provided around the payment of ancillary staff who have been forced to cocoon.
7. No clarity has been provided as to what will happen if no staff member volunteers for the position of Lead Worker Representative, which seems likely as the post is currently configured. The Principal cannot be expected to assume the position.
8. No clarity has been provided vis-à-vis the additional time that will be required of all staff members in order to keep our schools running smoothly in the current context. For example:
  - a. Will induction and reconfiguring of classrooms prior to schools reopening be taken out of Croke Park Hours
  - b. The health guidelines advise against having staff gather together before and after school. Can Croke Park hours be done remotely at a later time?
9. No guarantees have been provided that schools will not lose teachers if students are slow to return to school (because of health or travel concerns, or international travel for example) and do not appear before 30<sup>th</sup> September.

The Management Bodies note that there are more than 100,000 pupils in classes of over 30 and approx. 5,000 pupils in classes of over 35. Furthermore there are many established, new and developing schools which are not operating in school buildings or in standard classrooms.

Given these facts it is certain that there will be a number of schools which will need support in terms of accommodation and there does not seem to be as yet a clear process or funding stream for dealing with these schools.

The Management Bodies are also concerned that there has not yet been any discussion as to how staggered breaks will operate and how staff will themselves get a break under the social distancing regime.

The single greatest challenge facing schools operating under a social distancing regime will be ensuring that there is a teacher in front of every class.

In 2018 84% of schools had difficulty finding a Substitute Teacher and 44% indicated that their school has been unable to fill a vacancy this year, due to difficulties with teacher supply.

While there is some anecdotal evidence that there may be more teachers available to provide substitution this year, the demand for substitutes will also increase due to the fact that teachers will need to take sick leave if they develop cold and flu symptoms. Without substitute teachers already employed and available on local panels, it will prove impossible for schools in certain areas of the country to cover illness and other absences, which we know will be considerably higher.

The Department has indicated it is considering the employment of extra teachers under a one-year fixed term contract but has as yet given no firm indication as to the number of teachers it is considering hiring. Schools can manage most issues but they cannot manage without teachers or personnel to step up in the case where the principal is unable to attend at school. Clarity is needed as soon as possible on this issue.

The Management Bodies are also concerned about school transport. In order to achieve the objective of keeping Covid out of schools, while also ensuring all children can get to school, the school transport system will have to be reconfigured to reduce the number of schools served by individual buses. While this is not the responsibility of school management, it seems clear that bus providers will also need to be required to ensure enhanced cleaning, and that additional bus escorts will be needed, and provided with whatever protective equipment is required.

Arrangements will also need to be put in place for pupils who will not be able due to health issues to use school buses. These and other questions need to be answered as soon as possible. There is a real danger that the school transport system could be the Achilles heel of any system to keep COVID-19 out of schools as children from multiple schools use the same buses to access school.

In discussing these and other issues it essential that we have;

1. A roadmap of the issues that have been raised at the forum that have been addressed, the outstanding issues and the timeline for discussing these issues with the relevant bodies.
2. An agenda for all meetings sent to attendees in advance of meetings so that we can prepare to contribute our considered views at the meeting.
3. Clear written proposals as to the options the Department is considering to address issues so that all parties are clear about the various options available and can advise on the most appropriate option after considering the proposals

## Appendix One

### School Queries – July 2020

#### Staff

1. Our caretaker is over 70 but wishes to come to work. Is he permitted to do so? If not, will the school receive additional funding to appoint a substitute caretaker in his absence?
2. Our secretary is over 70. Will the school receive funding to appoint a replacement in the short term when school returns?
3. We have a shared special education teacher working between three schools. Will they be able to continue in this shared role in September?
4. Our SEN teachers are attached to a number of classes. How will they be able to fulfil their roles if they are moving from room to room on a continuous basis?
5. How does our school proceed if no staff member offers to take on the role of the Lead Worker Representative?
6. Can, or should the principal of the school be the Lead Worker Representative?
7. In the absence of substitute cover, how will EPV days be managed without splitting classes?
8. How do we ascertain whether staff members have symptoms on a daily basis as outlined in the public health guidance? How do we deal with staff members who do not confirm on arrival to work each day that they do not have symptoms?
9. How do we ascertain whether staff have returned from travelling to countries not on the green list within 14 days of returning to school? Is there a plan through a national communications strategy to communicate the consequences of this in terms of returning to work when schools reopen?
10. Teachers will have to accompany pupils to the Covid-19 isolation room as they are in their care for the duration of the school day. Our school only has one teacher on site. How will they continue to teach their class while accompanying a pupil/staying with a pupil in this isolation room?
11. Uncertainty and anxiety around Covid 19 has caused a number of our families to delay their return to school (returning from abroad, illness/very high risk in the family, transport concerns, new junior infants, etc). Will our school lose teachers if our projected enrolment does not materialise by 30<sup>th</sup> September, just at the time when we need all the staff we can get to ensure our children's safety?
12. Our school has the bare minimum the NCSE can get away with providing but special schools and classes will need extra hands - extra SNA staff, extra teaching staff, extra ancillary services especially cleaners - is there any possibility of special schools and classes getting extra SNA staff for just this one year to help get schools reopen and all pupils back in?
13. A family has indicated that they will be returning from a foreign holiday the day before term starts. Should the school insist the children stay home for 14 days?
14. If a staff member reports having symptoms during the school day and takes public transport to school, is there advice as to how this staff member should return home?

15. Will there be training for principals in terms of how to manage the wellbeing of the school community on their return to school life?

### **Access to the School**

1. We do not have a Covid-19 response plan put in place yet for September. Apart from July Programme, are other staff accessing the school only as per the guidelines on access to school issued by the DES in mid-May. If so, do they have to complete the Return to Work form in advance of accessing the school?
2. Can volunteer parents help prepare the building for reopening? Do they have to complete a return to work form?

### **School Buildings**

1. Under the current guidelines, our school will not have space for immunisation programme to take place. How should we respond to the request?
2. Staggered drop off/ pick up times. What flexibility is allowed within the confines of a school day for this to occur and how?
3. How will teaching principal/school management manage pupils in class while also supervising staggered drop off/pick up times?
4. A number of after school activities take place in our school after school hours. Can these activities recommence in September?
5. Our 5<sup>th</sup> class has 36 pupils are in a small classroom that cannot guarantee 1m social distancing. How do we resolve this issue?
6. Our school does not have a spare room for use as an isolation area for staff or pupils who show symptoms of Covid-19. How do we comply with this recommendation?
7. Our school building is too small to accommodate all students with 1m social distancing, but there is space available in a nearby hall we could rent to enable this. Will funding provided for this? If not, what should we do?

### **Transport**

1. What precautions will employers have to put in place for bus escorts travelling with pupils to and from school?
2. We take pupils on school trips on a monthly basis as part of our history school plan. Can pupils travel use private transport during the Covid-19 period?
3. If parents cannot collect a child, and it is necessary to send them home in a taxi, will this cost be covered by additional grants?
4. Transport is a serious concern for all schools but especially special schools and classes. What about Bus Escorts who are also SNA staff if there are staggered arrivals and departures? It means that classes may not have their full staff complement when pupils arrive to school or the SNA may have to leave early to go with their bus. It's too late to send a child home if they arrive to school already sick and the bus cannot take them back home. Bus escorts have expressed fears that some parents might medicate child with calpol before putting them on bus and if this wears off on

arrival or early on in school day and then where do we stand? What can Bus Escorts do? What are they going to be expected to do and where does the Bus operator/driver responsibility stand?

## **Cleaning and Resources**

1. Will the DES be providing signage, PPE, hand sanitiser, Perspex screening etc. or should we proceed and purchase it ourselves now. If we do, will we be reimbursed? At what level?
2. How are schools to fund the arrangements that are needed to be put in place regarding additional cleaning?
3. Some schools have sought quotes from contract cleaning companies for the upcoming year but have been informed that they cannot provide them due to increased workload. Is there a danger that schools will not be able access cleaning companies in time for the reopening of schools?
4. Cleaning - special schools need more cleaning than regular schools in a normal year but now it is going to prove even more important. How often are we to clean? Are we going to get this funding and how will be provided?
5. Can we claim for PPE already acquired for use in the school if it was ordered before the DES said they would provide it? What about this minor works extra funding - we need that now for things like perspex screens, adjusting toilets and sinks etc and that has to happen sooner than later or schools cannot reopen when works are still being done. And to get a tradesman can be impossible in August.



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