



Educate Together Submission to Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on: Educate Together

“Ensuring that Schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable”.

October 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 95 national schools and patron (or patron/trustee partner) of 19 post-primary schools, which include voluntary secondary schools, community schools and community colleges. This includes 5 new schools which newly opened 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 (DE) 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.

When Covid 19 first impacted on Ireland's school system in March, Educate Together worked constructively with schools and with the DE and partners to support continuity of learning for all students during closures (examples of practice in our schools [here](#)). Since May we have worked intensively with schools and partners to support the safe reopening of schools. We are particularly conscious of the negative impacts of school closures on the health, wellbeing and education of vulnerable children and young people, and determined to do everything possible to sustain this and to ensure that schools have the supports they need for this purpose.

Engagement with our principals and boards of management throughout this period has indicated that they are fully committed to meeting the educational and health and safety needs of their students and school communities in these exceptional circumstances. However, they are under enormous pressure. This submission aims to outline their experiences and make constructive proposals for appropriate supports.

Our work with education partners over the past seven months suggests that there is broad agreement on the main issues facing schools at this time. As well as outlining our schools' experiences of the broader issues, our submission also 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.

2. Summary of Submission

1. School principals and boards of management have worked intensively to implement Covid measures and open their schools in exceptionally difficult circumstances. They are committed to keeping their schools open and meeting the educational and health and safety needs of all of their students, staff and school communities. However, current workloads and levels of stress are unsustainable, especially for school leaders in new and developing schools.
2. Additional grants for cleaning, equipment and minor works have been welcome and have facilitated the implementation of safety measures in most cases, although schools in temporary accommodation have faced particular challenges. Schools need certainty now in relation to grant funding for term 2.
3. Additional resources are required in primary schools for breaktime and before and after school supervision, substitution, and the planning and delivery of distance learning for children learning from home. Post-primary schools have received additional support, there should be parity at primary level.
4. Principals and voluntary boards of management need prompt access to public health officials and testing when a case is confirmed in their school. Regular updates in relation to infection rates and clearer information in relation to the risk assessment process are required to reassure parents and school staff that schools are not significant sites of transmission.
5. Improvements in the systems for development and dissemination of information and guidance from the Department of Education and Public Health would greatly assist school leadership and stakeholders to respond effectively and efficiently to changing needs, as well as reducing stress levels.
6. New and developing schools 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 running a school in temporary accommodation this year while keeping children and staff safe.
7. Additional accommodation required by new and developing schools for 2021 must be confirmed urgently, and projects progressed immediately.

3. Communications

In a recent survey, Educate Together school leaders reported that the School Response Plan and operational supports greatly assisted them on preparing for reopening, and maintaining a safe school environment for the whole community. Communication, however, was identified as a significant area of concern.

Communication with the Department of Education and Skills

Whilst we are all aware that we are operating in unprecedented times, with guidance often changing quite rapidly, school principals have reported not always been aware of changes that have occurred, as well as frustration with delays and lack of clarity at times. Principals have noted:

- Departmental communication is not always sent to the schools, or updated on the Esinet system, but instead updated on DE website only,
- Frustrations at media releasing information before schools have received it,
- Communications to schools are regularly sent out late in the week leaving insufficient time for review and dissemination before the weekend,
- Relying on principal colleagues or social media for updates,
- One source for all school-related communications would be better – HSPC update their website, but information is not sent to schools, for example
- On-time delivery of information would be more useful, rather than after the fact.

As a management body Educate Together has worked intensively with the DE and other partners to liaise between schools and the DE and provide feedback on documentation and guidance where possible. Similar frustrations have been experienced, and while this is understandable in the current circumstances to a certain extent, if better mechanisms could be found that would enable more timely and consistent provision of information, this would improve the quality of feedback provided, and make this level of engagement more sustainable.

4. Public Health Interaction/Communications

Schools who have experienced positive cases within their community have noted mixed experiences of their communications/contact with Public Health. Protracted delays in being contacted by Public Health after a confirmed case in school are leaving school boards operating in a vacuum and coming under pressure from staff and families to take action.

Schools in general accept the decisions made by the Public Health team. However, in a number of cases, they reported inconsistencies or incoherence to some decisions as to who were deemed to be close contacts. Rather than general statements that transmission in schools is low, the provision of regular updates in relation to actual numbers of cases, contacts, and testing would assist in reassuring school leaders, staff, and parents that the measures implemented are working, and that schools are indeed safe.

We welcome the recent commitment from Public Health to establish school specific teams in each area, and would call for more timely first contact with school leaders after a positive case confirmed, and better communication by officials as to rationale in identifying close contacts.

In relation to communications:

- **The Department of Education & Skills should be the single source for all Covid-19 related communications to schools. Clear information must be delivered in time for school leaders to implement measures advised.**
- **Principals need timely support from Public Health when dealing with Covid-19 cases in school.**

5. Covid-19 Operational Supports

The operational supports provided to all schools in the form of additional Covid-19 grant aid have been welcomed and seem mostly sufficient in meeting schools' requirements. In particular the provision of minor works grants were welcomed by 60% of our schools in a recent survey.

Whilst the Department-established framework for draw down of sanitisation equipment and supplies was in principle welcomed, the reality was that it did not work to speed up delivery of supplies to schools for reopening, but instead caused some difficulties. Many of the suppliers listed on the framework could not meet the needs of schools in a timely manner, with significant delays reported at the start of the school year, and many schools reporting having to source materials outside the DE framework

The additional cleaning requirements have resulted in many principals and staff taking on this work, which is not sustainable.

- **Schools now need confirmation of when additional funding for Term 2 will be forthcoming so they can budget appropriately.**

6. Staffing Impacts

Staffing and management time:

The Covid-19 pandemic uncertainty has impacted enrolments across all schools for a variety of reasons:

- Families unable to travel back to Ireland and return to/start school; children delaying school start until 2021,
- Children kept at home due to at risk family member, or being home schooled,
- Construction delays leading to housing delays and impacting families moving to area.

All of these factors have added undue stress for school principals as they sought out pupils in September to retain their teaching allocation.

This is further compounded for new and developing schools, due to accommodation delays and uncertainty – some principals have reported families choosing more established schools as they are ‘perceived to be somehow safer for Covid-19’.

The current policy on allocation of staff to developing schools is completely inadequate, even under normal circumstances. At primary level, for example, unless a newly opened 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).

The current health situation also brings additional workload for the principals of new and developing schools – at primary and post-primary level. These include:

- Additional cleaning requirements during the school day,
- Organisation of pupils into smaller groups,
- Establishment of distance learning capacity in the new school,
- Managing the increased anxiety among children and parents,
- Supervision needs for staggered opening times / limitations on building access for parents / illness or symptoms requiring isolation on the part of a principal / child,
- Covid-19 related staff absenteeism,
- Time required to find substitutes at short notice,
- Managing response if case(s) confirmed in school, including interaction with Public Health,
- Managing these issues in temporary accommodation.

All of this means that it is very difficult for the principal of a new/developing school to teach children while also managing the school, and ensuring the safety of the whole school community.

Educate Together, jointly with An Foras Pátrúnachta and the ETBI, have repeatedly requested that exceptions be made in relation to the appointment of the first mainstream teacher in new primary schools, and the additional posts in developing schools, which would significantly alleviate the pressure on these school leaders.

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

These schools are being opened in areas where additional capacity is needed because of population growth. They 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. Whilst we welcome the provision of some additional management time for the 2020/21 school year, this is far from sufficient for new and developing schools, and additional resources are still required.

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

Staff absences:

In a recent survey, 89% of Educate Together school leaders reported difficulties in managing the high levels of Covid-19 related staff absences, whereby staff are isolating pending testing, identified as a close contact, or sick themselves.

Finding substitutes at short notice, often on weekend days, is proving extremely time consuming for principals. Many schools, even those who have access to substitute panels, report difficulties in finding substitutes and hours spent ensuring school has adequate staffing levels to remain safely open. This is requiring considerable additional management time and placing stress on principals and deputy principals as they struggle to prevent the closure of classes. The requirement that Special Education Teachers should be used to provide substitute cover is neither equitable nor sustainable, given that children with additional needs require considerable additional support at this time. This problem is exacerbated in developing schools where the front-loaded allocation model and other factors leave these schools with insufficient Special Education Teachers and SNAs to meet basic needs. Issues also arise where substitute SNAs are required, and an additional complication is that only substitute SNAs who have already been Garda vetted *by that school* can be employed.

- **Additional teacher allocation is required in all schools to ensure cover is in place for inevitable and ongoing Covid-related absences and to prevent the disruption of supports for children with additional needs.**
- **A new system is required so that substitute SNAs do not have to be Garda vetted by each individual school.**

Increased supervision needs:

It has been broadly recognised that in implementing the Covid-19 Response Plan and maintaining a safe school environment, schools have required additional teacher supervision in order to maintain distancing requirements during class time, at break times and to cover staggered opening and closing times.

The provision of an enhanced supervision grant is welcomed at post-primary level, but at primary level this has mostly been provided in a voluntary capacity by teachers, which is not sustainable. In addition schools cannot call on the voluntary efforts of parents as they might otherwise.

Now that the DE are assessing the Covid-19 related grant aid to schools for Term 2, we would recommend

- **Funding is required to provide enhanced supervision supports to primary schools.**

7. Accommodation Impacts - Schools in temporary accommodation

Adapting the physical environment in the light of Covid 19 was considerable for all schools. In a recent survey, 30% of Educate Together schools have cited lack of space/classroom size as being a major difficulty in implementing the Department's Covid Response Plan. This has been compounded for schools in temporary accommodation.

48 of Educate Together's 116 schools (41%) are currently in temporary accommodation.

The 26 new schools we have opened in the past 3 years (14 primary and 12 post-primary schools) are all in temporary accommodation. 5 of these schools opened in September 2020. 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. Ordinarily, the challenges of managing a school in temporary accommodation are many and complex (see [here](#) for more information). However, with particular reference to the new challenges now presented by Covid-19 and implementing the Department's Covid-19 Response Plan, these can include:

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

For the schools that required additional/new accommodation for September 2020, the uncertainty that Covid-19 related delays caused, leading to last minute building handovers, added considerable stress and burden for principals trying to prepare to safely open/reopen their schools in the Covid context. In addition, 12 schools were required to open in accommodation that was insufficient for their needs or out-of-area whilst awaiting the delivery of their delayed September 2020 accommodation. This has caused additional stress and complexities while trying to implement the Covid-19 response plan.

Educate Together is currently working intensively with the DE and local communities to identify solutions in relation to 27 new and developing schools with need of additional accommodation for September 2021. While there are always challenges to ensure schools' accommodation needs for the following school year are met in a timely manner, we are concerned that these may be exacerbated by Covid 19 because of:

1. Delays with the planning process
2. Delays in construction and provision of pre-fabs

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 improvements in this area.

Particular concerns now are timely confirmation of accommodation solutions for September 2021, so that sufficient school places are available in developing communities next year, schools can plan for enrolments, and the pressure on school leaders is reduced in the summer of 2021.

- **Intensive work must begin now to ensure that accommodation is provided on time for new and developing schools for 2021 that is fit for purpose and located in the community the school is designed to serve.**

8. Principal wellbeing

Since schools closed in March, principals have worked tirelessly to support their school communities from transitioning to distance and/or online learning, to making their schools safe spaces for the children and staff. They are committed to keeping schools open for all children, and recognise the importance in particular of remaining open to support vulnerable children and their families.

The time demands on principals have never been more, from maintaining the clean, safe operating school environment, to managing staff absences, to dealing with confirmed Covid-19 cases, and much of this work is being conducted outside school hours. In a recent survey, management time was the largest challenge facing Educate Together principals at both primary and second-level, with 90% citing this as a difficulty affecting their implementation of the Covid Response Plan.

Principals are tired, stressed and burnt out.

For new and developing school principals, there have been the added stresses of

- last minute accommodation handovers,
- implementing the School Response Plan in temporary accommodation,
- insufficient enrolments leading to developing posts/additional teachers being suppressed,
- teaching a class, and managing the day to day of living with Covid-19 in schools.

School leaders need to feel supported in their roles.

The proposals outlined in this submission would assist principals in keeping their doors open and their environments safe for the whole school community.

Conclusion

Educate Together thanks the committee for the opportunity to make a submission at this time. The challenges involved in reopening school buildings and sustaining safe school openings since August have been many and complex, and Educate Together is working intensively with all stakeholders to ensure that schools can remain open. 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 additional financial supports and better communications. In addition, new and developing schools require additional consideration and teacher allocation. We hope that the committee can assist in ensuring that these supports are forthcoming.

Educate Together, October 2020

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