

The ASTI is acutely aware that members have major concerns regarding the use of information technology in the current climate. These concerns are exacerbated when teachers are asked to engage with parents and students remotely using IT platforms on foot of public health advice.

The ASTI sought and considered legal advice on those key concerns and sets out the below advice for reference by members.

Classroom Teaching

Remote engagement is no substitute for classroom teaching

Education is fundamentally a social practice. COVID-19 has dramatically underlined the importance of school in enabling education to ‘take place’ as a social practice. While the transmission of a society’s knowledge is an important dimension of education, the work of teachers in this process is deeply complex. When teachers teach, they are simultaneously creating a classroom environment which enables students to learn. They do this by observing students’ engagement with topics, their levels of understanding, their response to new concepts and knowledge. The concept of differentiation is useful to describe teachers’ classroom practice. Differentiation refers to the process of varying content, activities, teaching and learning methods and resources to take into account the range of interests, needs and experience of individual students. Students learn best in classrooms because they learn from their peers; they are exposed to different perspectives and understandings; they develop a collective identity as learners; above all, they have relationships with their peers and their teachers. It is this uniquely social dimension of education that sustains students’ motivation, curiosity, openness to learning. This social dimension is, moreover, central to young people’s developmental needs, their need to belong, to be respected and valued members of a community. These complex social interactions cannot take place online. All of the national and international research on the impact of school closure on students’ learning is unanimous on this point. Globally, teachers reported that the longer the school closure, the more marked the decline in engagement. Schools are the best places for the education of young people. Classroom teaching and the face-to-face interaction it entails are irreplaceable.

Equity and combating educational disadvantage are key policy goals for Irish education. Schools have made solid progress in meeting these goals as is underlined in annual OECD Education a Glance reports. High quality teaching delivered by professional practitioners ensures that the needs of individual students are identified and met in the classroom. Marked improvements in supports for students with additional and special educational needs have also been significant. Moreover, in school all students have access to learning resources – libraries, reference books, ICT, etc, – which may not be available in the family home. COVID-19 dramatically exposed the extent of the unequal access of students to learning resources, in particular, digital resources. Another key area of learning from school closure is the huge variation in parents’ experiences or capacities to support students’ learning. Notwithstanding the best will in the world, many parents found it impossible to provide the help which all students need when they are learning out of school. The experience of Covid-19 has established that classroom teaching is infinitely superior to remote teaching and learning.