

Ensuring that schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable

ASTI Submission to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

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Introduction

The reopening of schools after the prolonged closure from March until August 2020 was a mammoth task. Enormous efforts by school managements, staff and students were made to seek to ensure that the reopening was a success. The challenge now is to ensure, in a context that has seen a deterioration in the containment of Covid-19 in wider society, that schools remain Covid-19 secure and that school communities are safe. This is vital in order to ensure a sustainable second-level education provision for the school year 2020-2021. With the right supports, schools can meet this challenge. While teachers all over the country are commending their students for their willingness to comply with the new school procedures, at the same time, they are reporting that social distancing is not being achieved on a consistent basis in school canteens, yards, corridors, stairs and even in classrooms in many schools. With the best will in the world, it is hard for young people to resist the need to congregate, socialise and walk home in groups. With the hindsight of a couple of months of re-opened schools, teachers are more aware of the challenges ahead and are reporting increased levels of concern for their own safety and that of their students. These challenges are set out below.

Ensuring the health and safety of students, teachers and other school personnel

The duty of care of school Boards of Management to their students and staff has never been more acute. Each Board has conducted an extensive COVID-19 risk assessment of the physical infrastructure of the school and are committed to implementing and monitoring their COVID-19 response. Boards have also been required to update their Safety Statements setting schools' statutory obligation under the Safety, Health & Welfare at Work Act 2005 in accordance with Guidance issued by the Department of Education and Skills. Notwithstanding these important governance measures, differential capacity of schools to implement key aspects of the COVID-19 response plan is a fact. Hygiene and ventilation facilities still need to be upgraded; cleaning routines reviewed and enhanced. The availability and suitability of PPE for all staff and students also needs to be reviewed. During the month of July, the ASTI commissioned research on principals' views on the safe re-opening of schools. Key findings included the fact that 84% of schools did not have a dedicated ventilation system; 25% of schools did not have warm water in the school toilet facilities; and 76% of schools have to re-purpose communal areas to meet the 1-metre social distancing requirement in classrooms.¹ Earlier research commissioned by the ASTI provides further evidence of the challenges many schools face in terms of physical capacity and space. Key findings included: majority of English and Irish classes in the junior cycle level have class sizes of between 26-30; 45% of teachers reported that their classrooms were overcrowded. In fact, overcrowding was a dominant theme in the RedC research: only 39% agreed that the quality of the physical environment in their school was good; even less – 31% - agreed that the school was *not* overcrowded; and only 20% agreed that class size was not a problem in their school.²

ASTI has publicly raised the question of whether the current arrangements in school are sufficient and/or appropriate given the significant change in the prevalence of Covid-19 in wider society since schools reopened in August 2020. Given the implementation of stricter restrictions in wider society

¹ Europlan Group Health and Safety, 'Survey of ASTI Principals views on preparedness for reopening schools', July 2020

² RedC Research and Marketing, 'Physical Environment in Schools for Junior Cycle: The Teachers' Perspective' March 2020

and the growth in community transmission throughout the country, ASTI has called for intensive daily monitoring of the progression of the virus in schools and that there be a rapid response to any deterioration of the situation in individual schools or across the network. Prioritising schools for rapid testing and tracing is absolutely necessary if we are to keep schools safe, keep schools open and reduce the stress levels of teachers.

Monitoring compliance and ensuring accountability

Boards of Management have a duty to continue to monitor compliance with the return to work protocols and other public health guidelines. To that end, ASTI is anxious that the Inspection model that is currently being piloted by the Department of Education, in conjunction with the Health and Safety Authority will be rolled out nationally without further delay. The importance of leadership from the Department of Education and Skills in this and other accountability mechanisms cannot be overstated.

The ASTI has also expressed specific concerns regarding the move to Level 5 restrictions. The Departmental guidelines specify that schools staying open is contingent on recommendations based on situation and evidence at the time. It is not clear if this is on an individual school basis or for all schools collectively. The testing and tracing regime in place has also given rise for concerns. In particular, tracing has been slow to bring to completion in some schools.

Vulnerable teachers and students

In every school there are teachers and students who are vulnerable in terms of their health status or particular personal circumstances, including pregnancy. The ASTI is dismayed that many of these members have been required to attend schools and no remote or reasonable accommodations have been implemented to allow them to participate in their work or studies in a more appropriate setting. The Department of Education and Skills must direct that schools can exercise flexibility in certain circumstance and that such teachers can work remotely. We renew this call in the context of the escalated prevalence of the virus.

ASTI members' concerns

The ASTI Central Executive Council, at its meeting on 19th September, 2020, decided to hold a postal ballot of members in respect of a number of key issues. These included serious health and safety concerns around Covid-19; unilateral changes to work practices in some schools without consultation and the necessity to resolve the longstanding ASTI campaign equal pay for equal work for all our members. The latter not only serves to demoralise teachers but also reduces the attractiveness of teaching as a profession. At a time of serious strains in the supply of teachers, the impact of unequal pay on entry and retention in the profession can no longer be disregarded.

This balloting process sought to provide a comprehensive framework for the ASTI to take industrial action, if necessary, on a range of current issues. While strike action would be a last resort, for a trade union it is vital to have all the tools at our disposal to deal with whatever issues arise.

ASTI members voted to take industrial action unless the Government immediately addresses key Covid-19 issues in schools. These include the need for a comprehensive testing programme, rapid testing and turnaround, appropriate resources for schools to ensure continuation of learning where there are school closures/ self-isolation, a redefinition of close contacts for school settings and appropriate arrangements for teachers categorised as 'high risk'. ASTI members are clearly stating that they want schools to remain open for students during this pandemic. They are demanding that the Government provide the necessary resources for sustaining education for our children and young people."

On unequal pay, ASTI members voted to take industrial action for equal pay for equal work, to be taken in conjunction with one or both of the other teacher unions. ASTI members remain absolutely committed to achieving equal pay for teachers who entered the profession from 2010. We will not stop until this abhorrent inequity is removed.

The issues we seek to have addressed have been highlighted above and include appropriate physical distancing arrangements in every classroom, appropriate mask supplies, testing and tracing that is quick and efficient, etc. ASTI notes that a 'close contact' in Irish schools appears not to conform to the definition being implemented elsewhere. ASTI has called for a broadening of the definition in use to one which would be more consistent with other workplaces.

We have also called for the free provision of laptops for students and teachers to ensure that learning can continue as much as possible if classes are required to self-isolate, or schools are required to close due to Covid-19.

Finally, ASTI members are reporting that a lack of communication protocols in schools where an outbreak has occurred has been a major issue since reopening. While everyone accepts that privacy is important for anyone affected by COVID-19, the fears and anxieties that an information vacuum engenders in those circumstances are difficult to contain. Teachers are not told in many situations if positive cases have been detected or not which gives rise to an unhealthy rumour mill. It is necessary that schools are guided on how to communicate in these circumstances and in a manner that addresses and alleviates concerns.

COVID-19 is an occupational health problem

The ASTI is heartened by the recommendation issued by the COVID-19 Oireachtas Committee that the disease be designated be a reportable disease under health and safety regulations and for more inspectors for the HSA to ensure enforcement and compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol. This decision is consonant with the view of the ICTU that if a worker acquires an illness in the workplace, it must be reportable to the HSA, and must be examined by the HSA to identify how the injury/ illness was acquired and how future injury/infections can be prevented. The objective would be that the HSA would then examine each incident where COVID-19 is acquired in the workplace, to identify the causes, and to identify improvement in practices that will reduce future infections. This is exactly the kind of robust and practical response that is necessary to keep our schools open and safe. Workers' health and safety, their very lives, cannot be relegated to the realm of legal quibbles over definitions in the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act, 2005. We urge this Committee to follow the lead of its colleagues in the COVID-19 Committee. The pandemic requires us all to rethink what were once certainties and to adopt creative solutions to unprecedented challenges.

Conclusion

Teachers are essential workers in the education system. It is essential that schools are safe spaces for teachers and students: health, safety and welfare must be the priority of school management and the Department of Education and Skills. Teacher workload and focusing on their wellbeing underpin the overall policy in ensuring that schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable.