



## September Return to School

In the absence of vaccine for Covid-19, preparing for a return to school in the Autumn will be complex, challenging and costly.

It will require;

- **A robust national roadmap** for a safe return to school, which is based on the best health information available;
- Clear and timely **communication** with all stakeholders so that expectations are managed and all stakeholders, parents, pupils, principals, teachers and staff, and management understand their roles and responsibilities;
- **Consultation** to ensure that the roadmap is realistic, offers sufficient guidance and direction to be useful and sufficient flexibility to be implementable at local level;
- Sufficient additional **resources** to implement the Roadmap.

The first concern must be the safety of the children in our care, and of the staff who work in our schools. It is therefore essential that any re-opening roadmap be based on the latest and best healthcare information and that the rationale behind that advice is understood by those who draft the plan and those charged with implementing it.

Public health advice must dictate the planning framework and the parameters for a return, for example how many pupils can schools accommodate safely, how often must classrooms and other areas be cleaned etc.

CPSMA recommends that;

- The Primary Forum be used to assist the DES in preparing a roadmap for a return to school, to surface the issues which need to be addressed and provide feedback on draft plans;
- A communications strategy be put in place to ensure clear, timely, and targeted communication with stakeholders. This may require a dedicated communications function;
- An immediate halt to all initiatives due to be introduced in the academic year 2020-21. The recommencement of the school year 2020-21 will place immense pressure upon school communities who will be working in a vastly altered environment and so a pause on new initiatives is essential.

- Mechanisms are put in place to ensure consultation with stakeholders on the ground to stress test plans and guidance before release into the system;
- Additional resources are secured from DPER in advance, and announced, so that principals and boards of management are reassured that they will have the resources necessary to implement the recommendations of the roadmap.
- Active consideration be given to the appointment of an experienced project manager to support the development and roll out of the Road Map, and a dedicated communications executive to design and implement a structured communications plan.

Given the scale of the challenge and the numbers involved, it may be prudent to prepare for a phased return to schools, and a rolling cycle of attendance (either by time, day or weekly) to manage the numbers in a school at any given time.

If such an approach is adopted, this must be clearly flagged to schools and parents well in advance.

In addition to this, if a full school re-opening is not possible, it will be necessary for the Department of Education and Skills to develop a coherent, structured distance learning plan for all schools. The development of any such plan must be fully informed by the principles of child protection and data protection. Any resources developed by the Department in this area must be fully GDPR compliant, with the provision of checklists and templates for schools. The NCCA must also provide guidance on the adaptation of the child centred primary school curriculum for this purpose. Furthermore, the provision of any such distance learning plan must be underpinned by adequate resourcing and the principles of equity of access for all pupils and schools.

Implementing any plan at local level will require;

- Risk assessments to be carried out in each school building and grounds to ascertain how many pupils could be accommodated in each classroom, social distancing measures required (cleaning procedures and routines, signage, markings, hot water requirements, PPE, hand sanitiser etc.) and any other specific requirements for individual schools.
- Communication to parents from school outlining the protocols that will be put in place and survey of how many intend on returning at the start of



the school year (experience in other jurisdictions indicates a minority of parents will not send children to school at least initially).

- Clear guidance for principals and boards of management, including checklists and templates for risk assessments.
- Tailored guidance and supports for special schools and DEIS schools.
- Adequate resources (e.g. hand sanitisers etc) to implement the local plan, which must be in place prior to a return to school.

As stated above, preparation for a return to school in the autumn will be complex. The following issues and key questions were identified through a workshop with CPSMA Education Advisors and from consultation with our members. Where appropriate we have flagged resource implications.

## **Pupil Return**

### Issues

- Identifying the percentage of pupils who will return and how they will remain socially distanced from each other when schools open will be key, as will building trust with parents in advance and communicating the return to school and provisions in place will be key to its success.
- Assessment of available space in each school/classroom to determine how many pupils could be facilitated. Reduced number in the school on any one day. Options of rotating on half days, daily basis, half weeks or week on, week off rota for pupils. Individual schools to have flexibility on what suits them best in consultation with all stakeholders.
- Survey of parents in advance of return to identify the numbers of pupils initially returning
- Markings to delineate 2m between individuals in general school community
- Pupils in special schools or special classes with intimate care needs and individual school transport arrangements

## Key Questions

- How is suitable amount per room calculated? Is it different in junior/senior classes?
- How do they get to school? Will buses be available? (**resource implications – additional transport**)
- How will Bus Escorts / bus drivers manage social distancing?
- How is the school kept clean every day? Pupils to clean as they go? School cleaned at intervals or deep clean at the end of each day thoroughly? (**resource implications including hand sanitizer in every classroom, additional ancillary hours/additional staff to assist with cleaning and provision of hot water as per p.10 of *Management of Infectious Disease in Schools 2014*. “Liquid soap and warm running water should be provided” and “hot and cold mixer taps that are thermostatically controlled to deliver hot water at a maximum temperature of 43°C to avoid scalding”**)
- How is breaktime organised?
- How is social distancing ensured in yard, at school gate, at entrance to classrooms, at school door entrances? (**resource implications for signs/markings to do so**)
- Should start and finish times be staggered to avoid large crowds arriving/leaving at the same time? One in one out system at gate etc.?
- Possibility of one-way system of movement in school where possible?
- How do we give consideration for the fact that school routines may have to be relearned due to the amount of time out of school ?
- How do we support pupils with specific needs who may struggle and require additional support?
- How parents are reassured? Methods of communication and when?
- Can July Provision go ahead in advance of the return in September?

## **Staff Return**

### Issues

- Staff fall into a number of categories – those who are ready to return, those who have underlying conditions, are in the vulnerable category, those who must cocoon and those who are caring for family members, and those who have young children that need childcare among others.

- By having a comprehensive plan in place, including CPD (**resource implication**), in advance of the return to school, staff anxiety, which will be factor, may be reduced

### Thoughts

- Will a risk assessment be required to assess how staff safety is best addressed? What criteria are used to determine who returns to work?
- Will CPD required for staff on how to work under restrictions and what should and should not be done to prevent spread of coronavirus, dealing with pupil anxiety, gradual return to teaching and learning, revision of child safeguarding training etc. (**resource implication**)
- What levels of PPE is any required and available in schools before reopening? (**resource implication**)
- Yard duty guidelines and congregation in the staff room?
- Allowances for staff who feel that they cannot return and staff rota for return?
- Provision of increased levels of substitution to support staff absenteeism? (**significant resource implication**)
- Continuation of distance learning provision for pupils opting not to return to school, do we need a national strategy?
- What are the implications for staff dealing with children with behavioural challenges?
- Staff working with young pupils with less understanding of social distancing?
- How will staff attend to injured pupils?

## **Pupil Wellbeing**

### Issues

- School communities will have lost family or community members as a result of coronavirus.
- Pupil wellbeing issues as a result of separation from family and friends, bereavement of family members, social anxiety, peer/online abuse and pupils returning to school coming from homes where domestic abuse or substance abuse and other child protection concerns is a reality.



### Key Questions

- Can resources in place proactively to support vulnerable children who have lost family members to the pandemic ? **(resource implication)**
- How do we deal with an increase in child protection referrals on return to school?
- Can we provide a space for pupils to speak on return to school?
- Can we communicate this to parents in advance to assist in building confidence that schools are prepared to support pupils on their return?

## **Curriculum Planning**

### Issues

- There may be a wide range of learning taking place during restrictions for a wide variety of reasons. Schools to consider what pupils have learned during the restrictions and to create informal forms of assessment to guide next stages in teaching and learning.
- Also, a cohort of the school community will not be returning to school and will require continued support from home.
- There may be a reduction in the amount of books that return to school in September due to wear and tear or damage. On return, pupils will also not have the facility to share books/folders as is commonly done in schools **(resource implication for Book Rental)**
- The quality of teaching and learning will be different on return.

### Key Questions

- Should schools consider project based approaches (e.g. arts projects) to teaching and learning initially on return, with less of a focus on heavily structured teaching and learning until a baseline of pupil attainment is established?
- Schools to adopt a softly, softly approach to re-engagement with the curriculum on return. The priority is the safety and wellbeing of the pupils and that they feel safe at school
- Education on prevention of coronavirus and how we can keep each other safe in the school to be prioritised
- Continued distance learning support for pupils who do not return. Who coordinates this, what will constitute engagement and will there be an

onus on schools to insist on engagement? Also, there will be a need for CPD for teachers to support such pupils (**resource implication**)

- Clarity on how inspectors will re-engage with schools and in what capacity? Support or evaluation? How will this happen?
- What level of expectation will there be on schools with regard to quality teaching and learning? What will quality teaching and learning look like? Will inspections continue as before in these circumstances?
- How do schools assess which pupils are prioritised for ICT resources?
- Should the NCCA be tasked with creating curriculum guidelines for learning under a social distancing regime?

## School Management

### Issues

- There will be huge pressure on boards of management, and in particular, Chairpersons and principals to get the return to school right. Principals especially, have already been co-ordinating distance learning in their schools and engaging teachers and parents in this endeavour, continuing OLCS payroll provisions e.g. dealing with leave queries, substitute payments etc., continuing ancillary staff payments, drafting Admissions policies and planning for staffing for the coming year.
- Boards will have to make difficult decisions with regard to re-opening in response to anxious parents and staff. The pattern of schools thinking on their feet first followed by DES guidance afterwards will have to be reversed. DES guidance and support in advance in this regard will be crucial.
- Leave and substitution – all categories of leave will require substitute cover and availability of a substitute – no longer adequate to split classes given social distancing requirements. Furthermore, this may require expedited Garda vetting processes for those employed as sub teachers under 5 day rule or as sub SNAs.
- Special category leave – currently the CMO is speaking about how it will be socially unacceptable to present at work with a cough / cold symptoms - a specific leave category will be required to ensure that teachers and SNAs

do not exhaust their sick leave if required to be absent from school due to this.

- Concerns regarding school's ability to manage non-compliant members of community – this has always been an issue in schools which has been somewhat ignored by DES.
- Some pupils will not return to school and the issue of their absence and recording of same arises
- School management would need clarity around the availability of staff that were temporarily reassigned under circular 27/20 being available for work in preparation for schools reopening.

#### Key Questions

- How can the recruitment process proceed with current social distancing measures in place?
- Finance for resources required for pupils and staff to return to school? **(resource implication)**
- How does school direct or does staff member make decision re leave if staff member is presenting with a cough or cold as outlined above?
- Can the DES provide clear direction re; dealing with unreasonable individuals, verbal abuse/harassment/assaults on staff/ coughing/spitting at staff in light of potential non-compliance (which we expect will be much higher than will be reported) with future Covid-19 requirements?
- If pupils are absent as a result of Covid-19, how will their absences be recorded and will there be an obligation to report the absences to Tusla?