



Sinn  *Féin*

KEEPING SCHOOLS OPEN

The next steps in Education

Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire TD

Sinn Féin spokesperson for Education & Skills



KEEPING SCHOOLS OPEN



THE NEXT STEPS IN EDUCATION

KEEPING SCHOOLS OPEN – THE NEXT STEPS IN EDUCATION

Children need schools to be open. We all know that despite the best efforts of everyone - parents, teachers, SNAs and school staff - that many children feel behind.

This is particularly the case for children who have special educational needs, or are at risk of becoming disengaged from education.

Sinn Féin has made the safe and sustainable reopening of schools a priority and have been pushing the Government for a roadmap for schools for many months.

We greatly welcome the fact that in the past two weeks, the process of schools reopening has begun. Incredible work on the part of principals, teachers and school staff, and boards of management has delivered this, and we are very grateful. We also commend enormously the role of parents and students themselves in recent weeks.

But let's be clear. The job is not done, far from it.

Now we need to ensure that the school doors remain open, and this will be as challenging, if not more challenging.

Sinn Féin wants to see a safe and sustainable reopening of schools, and we want to be constructive.

This month, Sinn Féin reached out to all Primary and Post-Primary Schools in the state, enquiring about some of the key issues that they faced surrounding the return to school and seeking feedback. It is clear from the response that more work must be done to ensure that the return to school is sustainable.

Sinn Féin Proposes:

- The introduction of rapid, priority testing for all symptomatic students and staff.
- An expansion of *force majeure* leave for parents who must stay at home to mind a child who is self-isolating.
- An audit of school buildings to identify schools struggling most with lack of space, and a commitment of €300m to address this and shrink class sizes.
- Abolishing all classes of over 30 kids, and working towards attaining a pupil-teacher ratio of 20:1 at a cost of €72m.
- Increased substitution through expanding the hours of underemployed teachers, deploying student teachers, and increasing access for rural areas and Irish-Medium education.
- Increasing the bus fleet so that no child loses their seat on a bus.

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BACKGROUND

The reality is that the reopening of schools in this jurisdiction was made all the more difficult because of the fact that we have an underfunded, understaffed, and overcrowded education system.

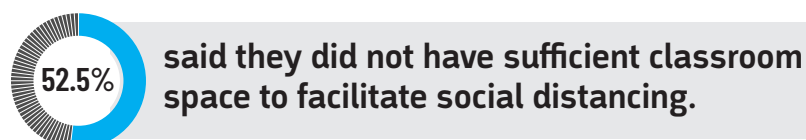
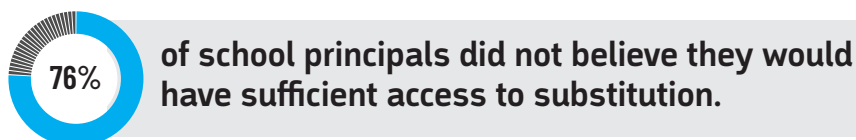
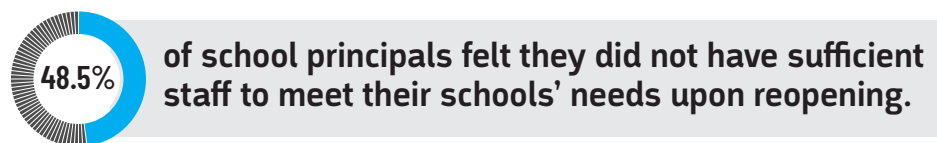
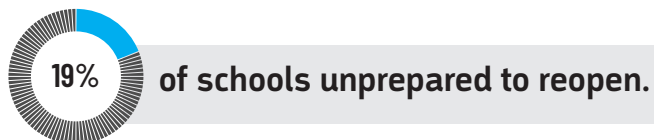
We have the highest class sizes in the EU, and countless school buildings are simply not fit for purpose.

The publication of the roadmap on 27th July, while welcome, allowed little over 4 weeks for schools to prepare, which forced schools to seek to produce absolute miracles in very limited time. Sinn Féin had called repeatedly for a roadmap for several months before that.

During the month of August, we contacted all Primary and Post Primary Schools across the state, seeking guidance and feedback on some of the key issues affecting them, and what needed to be addressed. We have sent this information to the Minister asking her to address these concerns. It is clear that there are particular concerns regarding numbers of teachers, adequate substitution, and lack of space.

Statistics from Sinn Féin Survey:

- ✍ These queries were sent to school principals from all Department of Education-aided schools. We received 198 responses.
- ✍ 19% felt unprepared to reopen.
- ✍ 48.5% of school principals surveyed felt they did not have sufficient staff to meet their schools' needs upon reopening, and 76% did not believe they would have sufficient access to substitution.
- ✍ 52.5% said they did not have sufficient classroom space to facilitate social distancing.
- ✍ 51% had put in place policies for remote learning.
- ✍ 22% said they would have to increase voluntary contributions this year in response to the additional Covid-related costs.



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RAPID TESTING OF STUDENTS AND STAFF

Sinn Féin propose rapid testing of staff and school children where they present with symptoms of Covid-19, giving both staff and students priority so that they can be cleared of having the virus and ensure staff can return to work, and children return to education rapidly.

The European Centre of Disease Control (ECDC) guidance proposes that all children and staff are tested should they show symptoms – “All students and staff with symptoms compatible with COVID-19 should be tested for SARS-CoV-2 virus...”¹

On Thursday 27th August, it was reported by RTÉ that this was to be introduced. Sinn Féin welcomed this as it is something we have been calling for and is vitally important.

However, it was subsequently reported that rapid testing is not guaranteed, and instead simply under consideration. This is through no fault of RTÉ, who reported on the information they were given, but appears to be the result of miscommunication and confusion on the part of Government sources.

That is simply not good enough, and is deeply disappointing to countless school staff, and families. In the instance of suspected case, all children and staff who show symptoms should be tested within 24 to 48 hours maximum.

To keep the schools open, we need to do all that is possible to keep COVID 19 out of schools, but we must also ensure that it is identified and eliminated rapidly if it does enter a school. Testing is crucial for this.

Sinn Féin Recommends:

- ➔ The introduction of rapid, priority testing for all students and staff who show symptoms of Covid-19, and for any close contacts identified by the Tracing Team.



¹ https://www.ncipd.org/images/UserFiles/File/Epidemiologia/School_testing_guidelines_draft.pdf

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GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT FOR PARENTS WHEN KIDS MUST STAY AT HOME

Should a parent have to stay at home with a child, the government must act to protect these incomes and jobs. Keeping the virus out of schools necessarily means supporting parents to do the right thing and keep symptomatic children home.

Dr Ronan Glynn, the Acting Chief Medical Officer, has affirmed this position, noting that – “People who need to self-isolate should have no fear about their employment... Economic circumstances simply should not be a barrier to people coming forward and getting tested.”

We must support parents to keep their children at home when they have symptoms. We cannot have families in the invidious situation of doing the right thing and keeping their child out of school, in the knowledge that they will struggle with bills for doing so.

Many parents remain worried and concerned about how they will manage to take time off work to mind schoolchildren who contract Covid-19, or who must self-isolate after a positive case in their class.

Countless parents do not know if they can use sick pay to take time off, if they can access paid leave, or if they can access illness benefit during this time. There has been no clarity from the government in this regard, despite the return of schools.

We believe that a significant expansion of *force majeure* leave needs to be introduced to address this. *Force majeure* leave allows a worker, for urgent family reasons, to take time off owing to an injury or illness of a close family member. If this leave is expanded, it will allow parents to take paid time off to look after children with symptoms of, or self-isolating due to, Covid-19.

In instances where a microbusiness or an SME cannot afford to sustain paid *force majeure* leave to working parents minding self-isolating schoolchildren, the state should pay a contribution towards the workers' *force majeure* leave.

The Tánaiste & Minister for Enterprise, Trade & Employment, and the Minister for Social Protection, must meet with workers' representatives, employers and all stakeholders to ensure that legislation here is changed to protect income and jobs.

Sinn Féin Recommends:

- ➔ An expansion of *force majeure* leave for parents who must stay at home to mind a child who is self-isolating.



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SUPPORTING AND PROTECTING THOSE AT HIGH RISK

Currently, there is significant anxiety among staff and children who are at high risk, and their families, as well as staff and children who have family members at home who are high risk.

While employees and children at very high risk are not expected to attend, this is a very high threshold. On the other hand, there is a very broad category outlined for what is high risk, taking in everything from mild Asthma to Leukemia, and those with extremely low immune systems.

In the instance of staff, the Medmark system is clearly a blunt instrument. There is a need for a much more graduated approach, involving an appeal that is truly independent, to ensure that the specific medical circumstances of staff are taken in to account, and that staff are not needlessly put at risk.

We put this point to the Acting Chief Medical Officer, Dr Ronan Glynn, on the 26th of August at the Covid-19 Oireachtas Committee. He replied:

*“Regardless of what categorisation or bracket obtains, **each individual who has a concern needs to be treated as an individual** with his or her own specific set of circumstances. If 40 people are in the outpatient department of any hospital in this country for an ear, nose and throat clinic or a respiratory clinic, each of them will be treated individually and differently based on his or her individual circumstances. This must be the approach to children, teachers and carers who have underlying health issues. It is not possible for me to make an overall proclamation. **It is a matter between the individual and his or her GP and the occupational health service.**”*

In the instance of children, many parents feel they have had very little guidance. We need much greater clarity on when a school is obliged to support its students in remote learning, where the family and their doctors feel that it is unsafe for a child to attend in person, and in what manner TÚSLA and the educational welfare services will apply the legislation regarding absences. It is important that we ensure that children are not lost to the system or become disengaged by falling through the cracks. But it is also important that those who have genuine medical concerns are listened to and their circumstances taken into account.

There is no guidance whatsoever currently for people at high risk who are not themselves working in or attending school but have a member of their household who is a teacher, school staff member or student. This is creating enormous anxiety for those families. They feel ignored and have very little knowledge of how to minimise their risks currently, even though often these are the very same families who might have been advised to cocoon previously. Guidance and communication with these families is essential.

The Department must provide parents and staff with greater public health information on exactly when to keep their children at home, and the supports that will be made available to them, in order to reassure parents and support them in making decisions that support keeping schools opened.

To provide for remote learning, however, without also providing the tools required for all who require this to participate, may exacerbate the educational disadvantages that have come to the surface in recent months. Children with little to no internet connection, and those without devices available within the home, should not be left to fall between the cracks of the digital divide. The Department must provide dedicated guidance on remote learning, as well as the tools to do so, for those children who must continue to stay at home.

Sinn Féin Recommends:

- A review of the Medmark system for assessing medically vulnerable teachers' fitness to work, with a more graduated approach to those at 'high risk' and an independent appeal process.
- Clear guidance for parents and staff on how remote learning will be facilitated, and who can continue to learn from home.
- Communication with families who have parents or relatives in the home at high risk, and facilitation of those children with remote learning.
- An increase of €5m to the ICT Infrastructure Budget, to purchase laptops, devices, and pre-paid internet dongles for children who must continue to learn from home and do not currently have access to these.

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THE NEXT STEPS IN EDUCATION

ADDRESSING THE LACK OF SPACE IN OUR SCHOOLS AND SHRINKING CLASS SIZES

The reality is, that the planning for the return to school was made much more difficult because we have the highest class sizes in Europe. The Government failed to tackle this in its plans for the reopening of our schools, whilst 1 in every 5 primary school children here is in a class of over 30.

There are countless classes that are far too big, in buildings too small, and not fit for purpose. According to figures released to Sinn Féin, there are some schools in the state that had classes of 39 (Kerry), 40 (Cork) and even 45 (Westmeath) last year.

It is our large class sizes that have made reopening so difficult. According to replies to a Dáil question tabled by Sinn Féin, there are 1,318 Primary Schools with classes over 30, with 74 in Meath, 69 in Galway and 147 in Cork. It is incredible that in the context of a pandemic, there was no effort to begin the process of reducing this. We can never again allow our education system to become so vulnerable to disruption as it has proven to be.

The first step in ensuring that educational standards and safety protocols can be maintained, is by drastically reducing class sizes down to the EU average of 20. Last month, Sinn Féin put forward a Motion which would have committed the Government to doing just that, but it was rejected outright by the government parties.

We have been advised by the Department of Public Expenditure that each point reduction of the pupil-teacher ratio will cost €14.4m per annum, with an average cost of €0.2m for each additional classroom.

If ever there was a time to tackle this issue, it is now. We must begin by abolishing all classes of over 30 kids and never allow them to return, and we must work towards attaining an EU average of 20 children.

Given our large class sizes, it is no wonder that in our survey, 52.5% of school principals said that they did not have sufficient classroom space to facilitate appropriate social distancing. Some schools said that the largest classrooms they had were 26 and 35 sqm. This is not good enough.

It is in no doubt that we have one of the most overcrowded and underfunded education systems in Europe. Indeed, Budget 2020 saw School Buildings funding cut.

Two weeks ago at the Oireachtas Covid Committee, Dr Glynn the Acting CMO confirmed that certainly all children in secondary schools are expected to maintain a distance of at least 1m. However, given the historically small classrooms in many areas of the country, there will be countless schools where achieving this will be close to impossible.

While we welcomed the additional funding for Minor Works as an immediate step, we know that in many instances the money available will not be enough to ensure social distancing, particularly in older school buildings. In our survey, just under a quarter of schools said that they were seeking additional accommodation for their school, making use of community centres, local parish halls, and local soccer clubs.

Crucially, there must be an assessment of need. Sinn Féin have proposed an audit of school buildings to identify those schools who are struggling most with social distancing.

A specific funding stream must be identified for those schools which, without additional monetary support to adjust their buildings, cannot achieve the required social distancing that will make their reopening safe.

The Government must also ensure that every school has access to an isolation room which is of an appropriate size and well-equipped to support a child who is suspected of having Covid-19. We have seen in recent weeks that some schools have had to resort to use of garden sheds for isolation spaces due to underfunding; this cannot be allowed to continue.

Sinn Féin Recommends:

- Working towards reducing the pupil-teacher ratio to 20:1 at a cost of €72m, beginning with classes of over 30 kids.
- An audit of school buildings to be undertaken, which identifies those schools that are struggling most with social distancing and require additional space.
- A commitment of €300m for the creation of additional space.



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THE NEXT STEPS IN EDUCATION

ADDRESSING THE ISSUES WITH STAFFING AND SUBSTITUTION

Sinn Féin are extremely concerned that the government have massively underestimated the number of substitute teachers required for panels both at primary and post-primary level.

Last year, there were more than 500 teachers a day who were not being replaced by a substitute teacher. The government have only provided for 200 additional substitute teachers in their reopening plan. This wouldn't even meet the need for last year, never mind the challenges of Covid-19.

In our survey, 48.5% of school principals surveyed felt that they did not have sufficient staff to meet their schools' needs upon reopening, and 76% did not believe that they would have sufficient access to substitution.

We need to rapidly identify and deploy as many teachers as possible to teaching. Firstly, we must ensure that where there are teachers who are underemployed, working limited hours, and seeking more hours, then the priority must be to increase their hours. We must also increase flexibility for job-sharing teachers.

As in any year, there is undoubtedly scope that student teachers could gain experience during their studies by acting as substitutes this coming academic year. These could be teachers in their final year of their undergraduate teaching course, or in their 2nd year of PME. Currently, in the absence of the Higher Education institutions resuming and outlining their plans for teaching practice and placements, there is a delay in these areas. The Minister should meet

with the relevant institutions in order to develop a plan to expedite this, and increase the scope for those studying remotely to obtain placements and practice nearby, including in rural areas.

There are also 6,000 registered teachers who are not active in schools – there may be many who are in a position to assist, and the work of identifying and allocating those who are willing to teach must be expedited.

Many rural communities have been completely left out of the panels, with some schools' closest substitution panel being nearly 2 hours away. Many large Gaeltacht areas have no specific panels. Clearly, this is not good enough. An emphasis should be placed on finding appropriate substitution for rural communities, and for teachers who have the capacity to teach in Irish-Medium education.

Sinn Féin Recommends:

- Underemployed teachers seeking additional hours should have their hours expanded.
- The deployment of 4th year student teachers and 2nd year PME students into teaching placements should be expedited.
- Increased access to substitution panels, with a priority on rural areas and Irish-Medium education.

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PROVISION OF ADEQUATE RESOURCES TO ENSURE NO CHILD IS LEFT BEHIND

Children with special educational needs are the cohort of students who have missed out the most since schools closed in March. Their routines have been turned upside down and the lack of socialisation has affected them deeply. It has also been extremely difficult on their parents.

Inclusion Ireland have noted that the lengthy closure of schools has impacted children with intellectual disabilities and autism more than any other group of children. In a recent survey they took of parents of children with special needs, 51.5% of parents reported regression in their child's education and personal development. This lost ground can often prove difficult to make back.

There is enormous anger at how little thought has been given to these children in terms of reopening schools. There is a meagre half-page of guidance on special education in the roadmap; it is simply not good enough. A specific guidance document and strategy is urgently required.

There are areas of complexity regarding children with special educational needs that are totally unclear, such as how moving between units and mainstream classes will be facilitated, and how inclusion can be maintained. Likewise as to the circumstances where children will be given exemptions from rules on masks, and how will this be governed. Local autonomy is important, but schools are crying out for greater guidance.

There is significant concern that the Roadmap and Circular 0045/2020 opened the door to special education teachers being used as substitute teachers. They are also to have a significant role in delivering remote teaching to students who cannot attend school.

We are concerned that special education teachers will be pulled from pillar to post to cover absences, breaks and remote learning. The Minister has said that this is not case, but the circular plainly contradicts this. Special education teachers' hours need to be ring-fenced for special education. The circular needs to be revisited.

Children with additional needs require greater attention than they are receiving under this package. There is a need for significant increases in the number of SNAs, which will be essential to ensure that children with special needs do not lose out.

We have also raised significant concerns regarding the model of allocation of SNAs, which are in many instances rigid, and give little scope for a significant change in the makeup of a class. The COVID restrictions may in fact exacerbate these problems.

It is also clear that some students have unfortunately fallen behind since schools have closed, and many are at risk of becoming disengaged from education entirely. Many schools who could benefit from it, do not currently have access to Home School Community Liaison or to School Completion programmes due to the failure to expand DEIS, particularly Band 2, in recent years.

Increased investment in school completion programmes and home school community liaison officers is crucial to ensuring that these children do not lose out, and that children do not fall through the cracks or lose contact with education.

Children with additional needs are rarely top of the agenda. If ever there was a time for that to change, it is now.

Sinn Féin Recommends:

- **Revision of Circular 0045/2020 to ensure that special education teachers will not be used to cover absences and breaks.**
- **An additional 100 Home School Community Liaison Officers, at a cost of €5.5m.**
- **A review of the model of allocation of SNAs, and recruitment of 500 additional SNAs at a cost of €14.4m.**
- **To restore the School Completion Programme to 2010 levels, at a cost of €7.3m.**

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SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Each year 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, rely on the School Transport Scheme. This term will inevitably provide significant additional challenges due to Covid-19.

The Minister just two weeks ago announced that buses must run at 50% capacity. The bus fleet must be swiftly increased so that whilst full social distancing and safer transport of children can be ensured, this does not come at the cost of some children losing their seat on a school bus.

This must also include increased provision of Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus services on key routes and at key times as schools start and finish each day, so that students are also not compromised when they travel on wider public transport.

Other outstanding issues also remain, particularly around transport for children with additional needs, the process around concessionary tickets and those parents and students who rely on non-state, private school transport.

We have already seen some routes cancelled by private operators due to the new 50% capacity requirement, leaving some students with no other alternative.

The school bus transport system is an essential part of getting schools reopened safely and keeping them opened. The government must ensure the myriad of issues that remain outstanding in this area are addressed as a matter of priority.

Sinn Féin Recommends:

- Increase the bus fleet, ensuring that social distancing can occur on all school buses without children losing their seats.
- Ensure that the rostering of the city and town services with increased capacity affords priority to the beginning and end of the school day.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the reopening of schools is vitally important.

It is essential for the mental and emotional health of many children and their families. However, any return to school must be safe, and it must be sustainable. A second closure of schools, or large-scale localised closures, would be extremely damaging and demoralising for parents, for school staff, and most of all, for children.

With the policies outlined above, coupled with adequate funding and supports, we can ensure that schools are in a position where they can remain open. Keeping schools open is a key priority for Sinn Féin.



