

ASTI Opening Statement to Special Oireachtas Committee on COVID 19

Response

September 2020

Chairman,

Firstly, I want to thank you and this committee for the invitation to attend today and the opportunity to address you.

Planning for the return to school in a context of an evolving public health situation was a fraught and complex process. The profound societal importance of the reopening of schools was understood by all. And of course, there is a lot of trepidation and worry amongst ASTI members. In terms of the preparation for this, phenomenal work over several long days was undertaken by school management teams, teachers and ancillary staff across the country.

I propose to make my opening statement here today loosely under three broad headings – the arrangements that have been put in place, the guidance that has been provided that underpins them and how the reopening is operating in practice.

Over those weeks mentioned earlier, the ASTI commissioned a piece of research which once again exposed the consequences of serious under-investment in school buildings for many years.

The survey found that school principals faced serious infrastructural challenges as they were preparing to re-open their schools in line with the government's Roadmap and Covid-19 Response Plan for Schools.

Example findings from the survey include:

- 84% of principals said their school did not have a dedicated ventilation system;
- 25% of principals said their school did not have warm water in the school's toilet facilities;

A RED C Survey commissioned by ASTI and carried out prior to the pandemic among teachers also found that 49% of teachers believed they work in schools with overcrowding in classrooms and 60% considered that there was inadequate storage available for staff and students

As we know, Ireland ranks in last place out of 35 OECD countries for investment in second-level education as a percentage of GDP.

We are coming from a low base.

This pandemic has put the spotlight on our underfunded schools. It is now glaringly obvious that Irish second-level schools operate on a shoe-string budget, with most schools having to fundraise to meet some of their day-to-day running costs. This lack of investment must be addressed if schools are to continue to operate safely in the context of Covid-19.

That is why the ASTI are demanding that the Department of Education commission new school buildings and in the meantime order prefabs in recognition of the fact that the Government approach of 'living alongside the virus' into the future is going to require major investment in school infrastructure.

With the number of students attending Irish schools increasing this year, principals also expressed concerns about the feasibility of social distancing for students throughout school buildings. More than 70% of principals surveyed rated the feasibility of social distancing in school corridors and other communal areas as weak.

The ASTI has also demanded that an urgent review be undertaken of the physical distancing requirements for schools, given the NPHET advice that only six people should congregate in any indoor setting and also in the context of the lack of clarity in the guidance that underpins the operation of schools.

In that regard, we wrote on the 21st August to the Health Protection Surveillance Centre seeking a meeting but they declined to accede to our request.

We then wrote to the Minister for Health on 24th August to ask that he intervene and set up such a meeting.

To date of submission of this opening statement (01/09/2020) we have received neither acknowledgement or reply.

We have very simple questions. These include:

The HPSC have been speaking in public of the possibility of fast track testing in place for schools, to get results back in 24 hours (similar to those in healthcare) or 48 hours at most. Why has this not been recommended and put in place?

Why was there no recommendation to put Perspex in front of the teachers' desks in classrooms?

Why is there no temperature testing, at least for adults, when they arrive in school each day?

Why was no guidance given on the numbers that could congregate for assemblies, staff meetings in schools and so forth?

The reason why there was such controversy last week on the holding of large assemblies was that there was a lack of clarity. Schools were unsure should they follow DES advice which was silent on the matter or government advice that was well known.

It was an extraordinary omission given that we were in the middle of the controversy on large congregations over in Clifden.

It was only when we in the ASTI stepped in and advised our members not to attend large gatherings in schools that the matter was sorted out.

At the meeting we have sought with the HPSC, we also want to seek clarity on the safety issues involved for teachers and students in the High-Risk health category.

The ASTI is receiving a significant number of calls from teachers whose illnesses include chronic kidney disease, cancer and serious heart disease. Anxiety levels for this group are very high. It is unconscionable that teachers who suffer the likes of these illnesses are being required to return to classrooms teaching sizeable groups.

For the avoidance of doubt, ASTI is demanding that the Minister for Education make alternative arrangements, such as working from home, for teachers and students who are in the 'high risk' category.

As we have stated in the past, well-being in school starts with teachers. They are in the front line of the work of schools. The importance of occupational health, safety and welfare at work was never more evident in all workplaces, including schools at this time.

Additional concerns that we would like to discuss with the Health Protection Surveillance Centre have emerged further to the publication last week by the Department of Health and the HSE of the Schools pathway document for Covid-19. It sets out the Public Health approach to managing isolated confirmed cases of Covid-19 within the school community, and also the principles that will underpin the management of outbreaks or potential outbreaks and the aligned testing strategy within an educational facility.

Provisions that are of concern include:

- (1) When a case has been confirmed it will not be automatically assumed that a whole class will be deemed as close contacts
- (2) There is no blanket policy on testing entire year groups and classes in place
- (3) Schools are not to inform parents or staff if a pupil or staff member goes home with symptoms
- (4) If someone goes home with symptoms -other staff and students do not need to be removed from class including siblings or other household members.
- (5) Contact tracing will be done on a case by case basis.

It is interesting that on RTE Primetime last week Professor Luke O'Neill argued that if a single child is infected, the entire pod has to go home and isolate for two weeks – and get tested.

Essentially, we want our concerns addressed and the rationale for much of what has been put in place explained. It is regrettable that those who are effectively making the decisions on these matters are refusing to meet representatives of those directly affected by them.

Another matter of concern to ASTI is the fact that the Department of Education and Skills appear to be doing little or no planning for the possibility that there might be individual or groups of school closures. At the outset, I want to make it clear, we all want the sustained

reopening of schools and hope that none of this will happen. However, this virus has shown itself to be persistent and it would be foolhardy to discount the possibility.

Since the closure of schools in March 2020, the ASTI has repeatedly stated that remote learning is no replacement for face-to-face interaction between students and their teachers. There has been a sustained output of research on the impact of school closures on children's and young people's wellbeing, health and education.

One of the key messages emanating from this research is the centrality of school to the lives of our children and young people.

Learning is essentially a social activity and the role of the teacher is absolutely central in creating an atmosphere for learning, encouraging students to persevere with difficult topics and enabling them to problem solve together.

This has been borne out by research from the ESRI and the ASTI which found that a significant number of students found remote learning challenging and their ability to self-organise and remain motivated diminished as the closure of schools continued.

We have also expressed our deep concern about the lack of access to IT resources and broadband in many households.

Teachers have spoken of three and four siblings working from one device, and in some cases the device has been a mobile phone.

However, despite all of our best efforts, we might find ourselves back there again.

We have demanded that the Department of Education bulk purchase laptops for students and teachers so that every student has access to reliable IT equipment in the event of future closures.

On another matter, principals also said that while the appointment of additional second-level teachers is to be welcomed, the measure is inadequate in terms of achieving manageable class sizes and cover for Covid-19 sick leave during the pandemic. This is a major concern.

The ASTI's message here today is that investment in education must be seriously increased. We need to see important enhancement of support for teachers and students' health and wellbeing, particularly with the provision of alternative arrangements for the most medically vulnerable in our school communities. Guidance and advice to the system on the arrangements, including those related to physical distancing need to be reviewed and updated. Staffing levels need to be adequately maintained and there must be proper contingency arrangements put in place to prepare for all eventualities that may arise.