



TUI Guidance

Phased re-opening of Post-Primary Schools

Following extensive negotiations with the Department of Education and based upon the advice and information from the Public Health authorities, the TUI Executive Committee, at its meeting on 10th February 2021 agreed to support the phased re-opening of post-primary schools, commencing with the re-opening of special classes in mainstream post-primary schools on 22nd February 2021.

The context for this decision is that the Public Health authorities have advised the TUI and the other partners that a phased return to post-primary settings is now possible provided that the proper and appropriate risk mitigation measures are implemented. Most of those measures – physical distancing, wearing of face coverings, hand sanitising, enhanced cleaning regimes etc. - have been in place since September 2020.

In the most recent negotiations, the TUI, in response to concerns raised by members, sought and secured significant additional measures to protect members during this phased re-opening. Those measures are set out below.

COVID-19 Case Numbers and Transmission Levels

The primary reason for the TUI insisting that school buildings must not re-open to students and staff on 11th January 2021 was the significantly higher COVID-19 case numbers at that time and the very high positivity rate. On 8th January 2021, there were 8,248 new COVID-19 cases recorded and a positivity rate of 22.4%, wholly undermining the confidence of the school community and making a successful re-opening impossible. Those numbers have now reduced significantly – on 9th February there were 556 new cases and a positivity rate of 5.9%.

We have therefore now returned to the level of transmission that we experienced when schools were open prior to the Christmas break. Given the additional measures now in place for the safe re-opening of schools (set out later in this letter) and taking full account of Public Health advice and projections that transmission will fall further in the coming weeks, the TUI Executive Committee has concluded that the proposed phased return to school buildings is now possible.

Testing of Close Contacts

It is important to note that the testing of close contacts in the community has now resumed and that the testing of close contacts in schools was always part of the plan for re-opening education.

Anyone identified by a Public Health Risk Assessment (PHRA) as a close contact will now be tested at day 0 (or as soon as possible after identification) and again at day 10. If the second test results in no detection of the virus and the staff member/student has no symptoms, then s/he can return to school.

Currently serial testing is recommended only in settings where there is evidence of significant COVID-19 transmission and in healthcare settings.

In all instances where COVID-19 is positively confirmed in a school age student in community testing (i.e. when referred by a G.P.) or as part of close contact testing in the community, Public Health will be immediately notified and a Public Health Risk Assessment initiated with the student's school by local HSE public health Schools Teams.

In all instances where COVID-19 is positively confirmed in an adult (including a student aged 18 or over) who works in (or attends) a school, either through symptomatic or close contact testing, Public Health will be immediately notified, and a Public Health Risk Assessment initiated.

A principal may also notify the HSE Schools Teams directly if s/he is notified by a teacher or other staff member of a positive case. Although not strictly necessary, the additional measure is welcome.

Public Health Advice

This week, the Public Health authorities have advised that a phased return to post-primary settings is now possible provided that the proper and appropriate risk mitigation measures are implemented.

Risk Mitigation

COVID-19 Response plans in schools must be updated to reflect changes agreed by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Department of Health with guidance provided by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA). The Framework document contains a link to the updates required.

Public Health specialists have advised the TUI that **all** the risk mitigation measures that were in place prior to school buildings closing in December remain effective against the transmission of COVID-19 provided they are **all** strictly enforced and adhered to by all in the school community i.e. proper ventilation, the wearing of face coverings, maintaining social distancing measures at all times including during break times and when arriving at/exiting the school.

Any instance where the management of a school does not enforce adherence to those measures, or where a member of the school community has not adhered to them, must be reported to the Lead Worker Representative (LWR) without delay and immediate corrective action must be taken.

Infection Protection and Control (IPC)

In advance of 22nd February, schools will be provided with specific guidance on what infection protection and control measures must be in place. These measures will be in line with the guidance issued from the HPSC (Health Protection Surveillance Centre). Funding will be provided to schools to comply with IPC guidance.

Weekly reports on school transmission of COVID-19

The TUI will continue to receive, on a weekly basis, the results of all mass testing of close contacts carried out in school settings and we will keep these figures under weekly review.

Public Health Teams

The DES has confirmed to the TUI that Public Health teams will be available to support fully the phased re-opening of schools. The same number of teams as would normally be available when

schools are open fully will also be available during the phased re-opening, allowing an increased capacity to address issues that arise.

Additional Protections for Teachers

Improved PPE measures

The TUI has secured the commitment that schools will provide all special education teachers and SNAs with medical grade masks. Any teacher who is required to work with students who require Aerosol Generating Procedures will be provided with additional PPE, also in line with HSE advice. Funding will be provided to schools by the DES.

Teachers are advised that in addition to the wearing of face coverings they may also wear visors. However, it is emphasised that a visor alone does not provide as high a level of protection as a face covering and face coverings must be worn as a minimum.

Vaccinations

It has been agreed that those essential to education (i.e. teachers) are estimated at this time to be in the first one third of the population captured by the Vaccine Allocation Strategy.

Teachers over 60

During this phased re-opening of schools, a teacher who is over 60 will be permitted to continue to work remotely and/or have more flexible working arrangements.

For the purposes of in-school teaching (of special classes), a substitute can be appointed by the school to replace any such teachers.

Teachers at Higher Risk from contracting COVID-19

Until now, any teacher who was categorised by Medmark as being high-risk still had to attend work. Under the measures agreed with the TUI, during the phased re-opening of schools, a teacher deemed high-risk may continue, for the duration of the phased re-opening of schools, to work remotely or may be assigned a list of other duties as provided for in section 12 of CL49/2020.

For the purposes of in-school teaching (of special classes) a substitute can be appointed by the school to replace any such teachers.

Pregnant Teachers

The TUI has secured a commitment that during this period of phased return to school, a pregnant teacher should consider herself to be in the high-risk category and the teacher should temporarily continue to work remotely.

For the purposes of in-school teaching (of special classes) a substitute can be appointed by the school to replace any such teachers.

Childcare and Changes to Parental Leave

Teachers are now deemed essential workers. Childcare facilities remain open to provide childcare for children of essential workers. A household of an essential worker can also form a bubble with another household for the purposes of childcare.

Greater flexibility has also been agreed with the TUI on the use of parental leave days as follows:

- Where an application for leave is in process up to the date of re-opening, a teacher may be facilitated to continue to work remotely in the interim days
- However, from the date of phased re-opening, a teacher who would ordinarily be required by the school to be on-site to support students but cannot attend the workplace due to childcare considerations, can avail of parental leave measures
- The 6-week notification requirement to apply for parental leave will be waived during this period of phased re-opening
- Blocks of parental leave of less than one week can be approved

Changes to Unpaid Leave

During this period of phased re-opening of schools, an employer can ease the requirement to provide 6 weeks' notice in advance of taking unpaid leave in order to provide a level of flexibility for teachers who cannot source childcare for school age children.

COVID-19 Leave

Members should note that access to special leave with pay remains in place for those teachers who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 or those who have been advised to self-isolate or restrict their movements.

To apply for special leave with pay, a teacher must complete Appendix A or B of CL49/2020 and return it to the school immediately. The completed form, which can be signed digitally, must be accompanied by appropriate HSE/medical certification (a text message from the HSE will suffice) to include the estimated date of fitness to return to work. The certification/test can be scanned and emailed to the school/ETB until you are fit to return to work and are in a position to provide the original version.

School Transport

School transport services will operate fully with the continued additional hygiene and other measures that were introduced on school transport services at the start of the school year. A 50% capacity on post-primary and SEN services with post-primary children has been implemented on the majority of routes operated by Bus Éireann.

Supervision and Substitution Scheme

The S&S scheme will be suspended for the duration of the phased re-opening of schools.

Re-opening of Special Classes – Practical Steps

- All teachers who work with special classes will return to school (unless you are in the high-risk or very high-risk categories and/or avail of the leave measures set out above).
- If a student in a special class would normally leave that special class to attend a mainstream class for a particular subject, schools should facilitate those students to access remote provision or online classes as provided to the student's peers. Access should be facilitated through workstations in another room with appropriate supervision by paid supervisors (not S&S).
- Where a teacher of a special class would normally, as part of her/his timetable, leave that class to deliver remote or online teaching to students who are still learning at home, the school should facilitate that teacher in delivering that teaching from the school premises or from home (where the teacher's current timetable is such that the travel from school to home is possible without encroachment on class contact time).
- Schools should make every effort to encourage the relevant students in special classes to avail of on-site provision during this phase.
- Where parents/guardians do not want their child with special educational needs to attend the school during this interim phase, staff members who would normally be working with special classes but who are temporarily working from home, then they may continue to support remote provision for that student. The student will not be marked absent, but the parents/guardians must inform the school in good time of their intentions.
- If the special class teacher is on leave, a school may temporarily reassign another member of the teaching staff (on a voluntary basis) to the special class to maintain the operation of the special class where that other teacher is not required to deliver online learning to mainstream classes at that time.
- Schools may use the entire school premises to increase social distancing measures providing the appropriate cleaning regimes are in place. Funding will be provided for this.

Return of other Post-Primary Cohorts

The TUI is in intensive discussions with the Department with a view to providing for a phased return for other cohorts with an emphasis on an early return of the Leaving Certificate cohort.