



**TO: TUI Second Level Workplace Representatives / Branch Officers / SLAC
Executive Committee / In-House-TUI HO**

5th January 2022

Re: Reopening of Schools – January 2022

Dear Colleagues

We write to you to update you on the current position in relation to the reopening of schools.

The TUI, together with the other unions and the management bodies, met the Minister for Education, her officials and public health officials yesterday. In a comprehensive briefing on the situation, Public Health stated that there was no public health reason to delay the reopening of schools. The public health advice therefore is that schools should reopen.

However, as many of the practical, operational issues facing schools and raised by the TUI were not addressed, much less dealt with, by the Minister or her Department at this meeting, the Union demanded and obtained a further meeting with the Department this morning to deal with these issues.

Among the key issues to be addressed are the following.

Guidelines

As a matter of urgency, the guidelines that teachers are required to follow need to be updated to take account of the current situation with the far more transmissible Omicron variant.

Attendance at school

The public health advice, which TUI has always adhered to, is that if you have tested positive with a PCR or antigen test, are symptomatic or are an identified close contact of a confirmed case you should isolate and not attend school. This applies to all staff and students. The TUI has requested a detailed summary of the advice for the school system that provides clarity in relation to isolation periods and takes account of the delays experienced (of anything up to six days) in receiving PCR tests over the Christmas period.

The application of close contact rules in specific cases must be clarified. Both the Department and Public Health have agreed that clarity is required but the requested document has not yet been received. Therefore, as schools open tomorrow, we can only advise that you follow the current advice, isolate for the stipulated 10 days and are at least 48 hours symptom-free before returning to school. It is important to note that it was confirmed that teachers will continue to follow the same rules as society in general and that, contrary to some speculation on social media, a derogation will not apply to education personnel.

Staffing

Given the increased infection rates with the Omicron variant, it is inevitable that staffing issues will arise in schools. In some cases, because of the shortage of staff, it will simply not be possible to have all students attend. Schools need to have the authority and discretion to make critical decisions both as to the service they can provide (based on the staff that are available) and which student cohorts to prioritise for attendance.

Mask wearing

Mask wearing is a requirement in all schools for all staff and students (unless medically exempt). This is more important than ever when dealing with the highly transmissible Omicron variant. In seeking best to protect members, their students and families, the TUI has called for use of the medical grade FFP2 mask in our school communities. In other jurisdictions and in other areas of the Irish public service upgrading to the FFP2 mask has been mandated.

The current public health advice to schools is that masks should be worn as previously advised. However, at the request of the Union, Public Health is reviewing the situation. Regrettably, it is unlikely the review will be completed by tomorrow, in spite of commitments made on 22nd December by the Minister and her Department that all necessary reviews would be conducted over the Christmas period and that up-to-date safety measures would apply upon schools re-opening in January.

Mask wearing is a requirement and is a significant mitigation measure. If medical grade masks FFP2 are available to you, we recommend that you should use them as they afford enhanced protection.

Ventilation HEPA filters

Schools were required to conduct risk assessments and should now know the classrooms and areas that are poorly ventilated or that require the windows to be opened so much that they become and remain too cold – an additional problem. These rooms and areas require mechanical ventilation solutions where fresh air is sucked in, stale air is pumped out and the number of air exchanges in the room can be controlled. These systems often include heat exchange capacity – warming the fresh air into the room as the stale air is being expelled. Installation of mechanical ventilation in these classrooms/areas represents a long-term investment and will make these classrooms safer and more usable into the future.

In other classrooms HEPA filtration systems should be used based on identified criteria. Our members – principals and other teachers – do not have the time to research and identify the correct systems for use in these classrooms. Where they have been able to establish what is required, principals in the ETB sector have now been told they will have to go through an unwieldy procurement process to purchase the HEPA filters that they have identified for use. This will involve delay, with the absurd result that HEPA filters needed now may not arrive in schools until the summer. The TUI is demanding a centralised approach which will fast-track the provision of both mechanical ventilation and HEPA filtration units to our schools.

With the typically colder coming months in mind, schools should also now be requesting additional CO₂ monitors so that teachers can more easily control the temperature in those classrooms where natural ventilation is possible.

Health and safety issues

Recognising the unpredictability of the current situation and the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, that TUI has called for a flexible approach where critical decisions will have to be made locally, based on teacher availability and the number of students in the school. At yesterday's meeting the Union was informed that operational matters would be supported by the inspectorate, which would provide advice to principals. The TUI holds that schools should ultimately decide what service they can provide based on the availability of staff and the substitution that they have at their disposal.

These critical decisions should be made as quickly as possible based on the information that is available to the school community as the situation evolves.

If it is decided that attendance by all students is not viable and/or safe, a school must be allowed to prioritise the cohorts to attend, bearing in mind, of course, the particular requirements of special needs classes.

If a full service cannot be provided, then a limited service is better than no service. Teachers who are teaching face-to-face are not and cannot be expected to teach remotely at the same time. There is no agreement on any form of blended learning and any suggestion that it be used should immediately be resisted and reported to the local TUI Branch Officers and the Area Representative.

The TUI has requested that updated guidelines to cover the Omicron context be issued and is hoping for more clarity today on this situation.

Schools must operate as safely as possible for both students and staff. All staff have a duty of care and must follow all health and safety guidelines. For example, if poorly ventilated rooms are too cold and remain too cold to be used, they should not be used. Students should not be put at risk of catching both cold and COVID at the same time. If necessary, the TUI Workplace Committee should address such problems with management and bring to its attention the relevant TUI directive.

While schools are not safe from COVID, they can be and, indeed, have been made as safe as possible by your efforts. It is because of your adherence to the mitigation measures (mask wearing, physical distancing, vigilance in identifying symptoms in students) and your commitment to keeping COVID out of our schools (using CO₂ monitors properly and creating proper ventilation) that we have been able to keep schools operating so successfully in the last term. You have delivered above and beyond the call of duty.

As we enter the new year, we have to meet new challenges and urgently need the practical, tangible support of the Minister and her Department on certain key issues. Specifically, the Minister must honour the commitments and promises she made to support you in your Trojan efforts in keeping schools open in a safe, equitable and sustainable manner – and providing a high quality, face-to-face education service.

We wish you well in your current circumstances and guarantee the full support of the TUI. If you have any issues in relation to health and safety, mitigation measures or other COVID-related arrangements, please contact your local TUI representative or Branch Officer.

Yours sincerely,



Martin Marjoram
President



Michael Gillespie
General Secretary