

**Ensuring that schools are open in a manner
which is both safe and sustainable**



**Submission to Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher
Education, Research, Innovation & Science**

Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)

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Executive Summary

The Teachers' Union of Ireland wants to keep schools open, as long as it is safe and sustainable to do so. Our members – teachers, including principal teachers - worked tirelessly from June to September to re-open schools. The task for us all now is to ensure they remain open in a safe and sustainable manner. Having analysed what this will require, the TUI is therefore calling for:

- Society to play its part
- Accurate, detailed and meaningful data on the transmission of COVID-19 in schools
- Rapid testing for all school staff and students
- Effective contact tracing implemented immediately by the HSE
- Additional protective measures for high-risk teachers
- Leave for long term COVID-19 Related illness
- More COVID-19 compliance inspections in our schools
- Additional teachers
- An end to pay discrimination
- Additional Resourcing – capital expenditure, ventilation, ICT equipment and training
- Workload issues to be addressed
- Restoration of middle management structures in schools
- No new administrative initiatives
- Necessary adjustments to curriculum
- A definitive decision on the running of the state certified Leaving Certificate exams in 2021

Introduction

- 1.1 The Teachers' Union of Ireland represents 19,500 members across a wide range of settings including Second Level Schools and Colleges, Centres for Education, Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities.
- 1.2 The closure of school buildings on 12th March and its impact on staff and students have clearly shown that, notwithstanding the very significant efforts made to ensure continuity of learning, nothing replaces face-to-face teaching and learning. It is, therefore, in the interests of all concerned (especially students) to keep schools open provided it is safe and sustainable to do so.
- 1.3 In order to enable schools to achieve this objective of sustainable opening, Government must provide the necessary levels of resourcing, clarity and assurance to all the key stakeholders in the education sector, and especially to teachers.

Adherence to Public Health Advice

- 1.4 The TUI has consistently stated - and now reaffirms - its commitment to follow public health advice. However, some of that advice lacks clarity, consistency and transparency.

- 1.5 A survey of over 1,500 members of the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) in the Post Primary and Further/Adult Education sectors, carried out in early October, highlighted a range of concerns around health issues, the inadequacy of resources in schools and increased workload – all of which have implications for the sustainability of on-site, in-school teaching and learning.

What is needed to keep schools open – health and safety

2. Society (including parents/guardians/young adults) must play its part

- 2.1 To ensure schools remain open involves effective action by all of society. It is unrealistic to think that teachers and other school staff can work in isolation to keep schools open. We all have a role to play. Parents/guardians must keep their children home from school if they have any COVID-19 symptoms, if they are advised to restrict their movement or to self-isolate. It is a matter of concern that some parents/guardians are ignoring this stricture, thereby putting at risk a school's ability to remain open to students.
- 2.2 Students who are young adults (over the age of 18) must take personal responsibility and not put themselves, their classmates or school staff at risk by attending school with symptoms or by not adhering to the public health measures.

3. Accurate and Detailed Data on the Transmission of COVID-19 in Schools

- 3.1 The TUI has repeatedly and reasonably requested access, on a weekly basis, to meaningful data relating to the spread of the virus in our schools – but, without success to date. This evidential data must set out the:
- total number of school staff and students diagnosed with COVID-19 - nationally and regionally
 - national and regional breakdown on COVID-19 infection by grade of staff i.e. teacher, SNA, auxiliary staff
 - level of national and regional teacher (and SNA) absenteeism owing to COVID-19 - as a result of teachers waiting for a test, awaiting test results, restricting their movement, self-isolating etc.
 - number of schools nationally and regionally by level (i.e. primary, second level) that have had recourse to partial closure owing to COVID-19
 - number of schools nationally and regionally, by level (i.e. primary, second level) that have had to close fully owing to COVID-19

- number of school staff nationally and regionally who have recovered from COVID-19 and have returned to school
- 3.2 Currently, in the absence of this objective data, rumours abound and take hold, anxiety increases and confidence in the public health system and in the commitment of government to ensuring the safety of all in the school community is eroded. That confidence is an indispensable resource. If it is lost, the sustainability of on-site, in-school teaching and learning would be in grave doubt.

4. Rapid Testing – School Staff and Students

- 4.1 Given the spread of infection across our communities and given Government’s oft-stated determination to keep schools open, the TUI has called for access to rapid COVID-19 testing (for staff and students).
- 4.2 Regrettably, delays both in securing tests and in the issuing of test results are being reported across the country. This has the effect of making the day-to-day running of schools very difficult, particularly as pay discrimination has resulted in a recruitment and retention crisis. An acute shortage of teachers threatens the sustainability of school opening at second level.
- 4.3 These delays are causing absence, angst and worry, adversely affecting both staff morale and the learning environment in our schools.

5. Effective Contact Tracing

- 5.1 Of particular concern to the TUI are the uncertainty and ambiguity around the definition of “close contacts” and “casual contacts” in schools. What appears to be a lack of consistency and clarity in this regard is causing severe stress and anxiety for school staff. The situation must be urgently reviewed as the sustainability of school opening relies upon school staff having confidence and trust in the system and understanding the decision-making process.

6. Additional Protective Measures for High-Risk Teachers

- 6.1 None of us should forget that a school is a workplace and a crowded one at that. The TUI makes no apology for insisting that teachers and other school staff must be protected in their workplace. This is a fundamental entitlement of employees.
- 6.2 Some schools have a significant number of teachers who are categorised as being at “very high-risk” and additional resources have been put in place for those teachers.

- 6.3 However, many teachers who applied to the Occupational Health Service for a risk assessment have had their illness/condition categorised as “high-risk” and therefore remain teaching in our schools.
- 6.4 Over one in five respondents to the recent TUI survey said that they have an underlying health issue that is of concern to them in terms of COVID-19, while 31% share a household with somebody who has underlying medical issues that make her/him particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. Meanwhile, 11% of respondents share a household with somebody who is over 70 years of age.
- 6.5 Many “high-risk” teachers have serious illnesses - such as heart disease or significant immunity issues. The TUI is seeking a review (of the risk assessment and attendant categorisation) for these teachers, particularly as we are now in a scenario where the rest of society is effectively locked down.

7. Leave for Long Term COVID-19 Related illness

- 7.1 While the TUI welcomes the provisions of COVID-19 Leave with Pay, the current arrangements only deal with the infectious (or potentially infectious) period. Some of our members are still experiencing lingering and debilitating illness months after contracting COVID-19. A special leave provision must be put in place for these members. It is not acceptable that front-line workers would have absence due to such ongoing COVID-19 related illness charged against their “normal” sick leave entitlement.

8. More COVID-19 Compliance Inspections

- 8.1 The TUI welcomes COVID-19 inspections in schools. However, we have already been advised of schools not adhering to the public health measures, of Lead Worker Representatives (LWRs) being frustrated in carrying out their duties and TUI members and School Representatives being treated with hostility for bringing health and safety concerns to management.
- 8.2 Appropriate and timely two-way information-flow (between school management and the LWR and between school management and union representatives/members) must not just be encouraged; it must be required.
- 8.3 In a minority of schools, autocratic and/or “heroic” management styles are proving very injurious to collaborative working. Opportunistic, fussy and oppressive demands are being made of teachers. In some such schools, the minimum standards in relation to physical distancing and the wearing of soft face coverings are not being applied and those members of staff who call for compliance with the minimum standards are subject

to intimidation and victimisation. The TUI's commitment to protect members by whatever means necessary is on the record and will be acted upon, even if it means taking industrial action in such schools. It would be extremely helpful and timely if the Department were now to act on its own commitments and bring errant management into line and into compliance.

What is needed to keep schools open – Funding/Resources

9. Additional Staff

- 9.1 While the TUI welcomes the resources put in place by the Government/DES to date, it cannot go unnoticed that the infrastructural and staffing difficulties now being experienced by schools are significantly more acute due to the fact that, for years, the education system has been chronically underfunded. OECD figures published in September 2020 show that Ireland's spend is the lowest of the 36 countries for which figures are provided, trailing lamentably behind the OECD and European averages. More is needed now, if the ambition of keeping schools open is to be realised.
- 9.2 71% of respondents to the TUI survey believe that the enhanced teaching/staffing allocation provided to their workplaces in response to COVID-19 - welcome though it was - has been insufficient to meet additional requirements, while just over half believe that their workplace has not been provided with the requisite resources (inclusive of staff) to ensure a satisfactory cleaning regime.

10. Teacher shortages – the inevitable result of Pay Discrimination

- 10.1 In order to protect and enhance the quality of our public education service, the teaching profession must remain attractive to the best graduates. However, it is evident throughout Ireland that teaching's attractiveness is rapidly on the wane and that, as a direct result, we are in the throes of an acute and deepening teacher supply crisis. School management cannot hire substitute teachers because they simply are not to be found. Graduates are not entering the teaching profession and this will continue until and unless the blight caused by the two-tier pay structure is resolved once and for all. The TUI has campaigned for pay equality since 2011. While we have made significant progress, we still do not have pay equality. Government's failure to act decisively to resolve this (government-engineered) crisis is shameful.
- 10.2 That 89% of respondents to the TUI survey believe that the ongoing two-tier pay system continues to damage morale shows not only that the problem has not gone away, but also that its hugely corrosive effects on the education system continue unabated. The continuation of the discrimination into the payment for additional

supervision work (to deal with the COVID-19 crisis) in Circular Letter 46/20 has caused particular insult and resentment.

- 10.3 If keeping schools open remains a priority for Government, there can be no arbitrary limit placed on resourcing. Funding must be provided to remedy key deficits, including the discriminatory and deeply damaging two-tier pay structure in our schools.

11. Additional Resourcing – capital expenditure

- 11.1 Tellingly, if unsurprisingly, respondents to the TUI survey identified more physical space and smaller class groups as the measures they would most like to see to counter the safety risks and meet the logistical and pedagogical challenges posed by COVID-19.
- 11.2 In order to ensure that additional resources are targeted for optimal effectiveness, the TUI is calling for a full health and safety audit of each school to establish and quantify what specific resources it needs to comply fully with public health advice and remain open. Furthermore, an expanded and accelerated capital programme - of school building/modernisation - is essential.

12. Additional Resourcing – Ventilation

- 12.1 Many second level school buildings are not fit for purpose. Failure by successive Governments to invest in the physical infrastructure of our schools could now potentially damage our students' and members' health.
- 12.2 Ventilation and heating problems will become critical as we move into a period of colder, wetter weather. Many schools, particularly those based in older buildings, will require new ventilation solutions, including monitors to signify when air exchange is required.
- 12.3 The TUI has sought the provision of indoor air quality monitors, similar to what is used in other jurisdictions across Europe. We note that the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has recommended that indoor air quality meters are installed in all classrooms. This must be done, urgently.

13. Additional Resources - ICT

- 13.1 The TUI has repeatedly advised the Department that many teachers do not have school-provided ICT devices or the skills to engage in emergency remote teaching should a partial or full closure occur. A dedicated funding stream must be provided to address this deficit.

- 13.2 Many of our students also lack access to the technology needed to engage remotely. To date, the funding provided to schools to assist such students has been wholly insufficient. It must be increased as a matter of priority.
- 13.3 52% of respondents to the TUI survey do not believe that most students have the required ICT facilities to participate in remote learning, while 28% of teachers are not satisfied that they themselves have the required facilities for emergency remote teaching. Meanwhile, 33% of teachers do not believe that broadband of sufficient quality is available in their school's community/catchment to support remote learning.
- 13.4 The TUI will not countenance a situation whereby students can access an education only if they can afford the ICT and have broadband. The poor and the marginalised suffer most in such an environment. Existing divisions are exacerbated. This is unjust, ethically unconscionable - just wrong.

What is needed to keep schools open – sustainable workload

14. Reduction in Workload – Principals and Deputy Principals

- 14.1 Teachers and principal teachers have a right to personal time. They cannot be on call 24/7.
- 14.2 It is completely unacceptable that school principals are being asked, on a default basis, to carry out contact tracing due to gaps in the system. Our principal teachers were already completely overwhelmed with a range of new COVID-19 related duties before this latest task was foisted on them. The HSE must increase its contact tracing capacity and must not seek to transfer responsibility for this critical public health function to principal teachers or to anybody else within the school community.
- 14.3 Aided by phenomenal commitment from their colleague teachers, principals and deputy principals pulled out all the stops to make sure that their schools could open as safely as possible for a million students, while still carrying out their normal, hectic, back-to-school duties. However, this has come at huge personal cost, with seven-day working weeks now a reality for most. This is not sustainable and resourced, additional assistance is imperative.
- 14.4 It is completely unacceptable, inappropriate and unsustainable that there is now an expectation that school principals will be able to do whatever is asked of them - carrying out contact tracing being but one example - whenever it is asked, day or night or over the weekends.

14.5 The damaging result of excessive and unreasonable workload demands - and the resulting additional, unsustainable stress - is that some principals have decided to retire early from the profession and many others are considering it. The haemorrhage of expertise and experience will weaken system capacity and cast into further doubt the sustainability of school re-opening. There is already widespread evidence of a significant drop in applications for senior management positions. Many of our members no longer aspire to holding senior positions and have decided to prioritise their own wellbeing – that in itself speaks volumes.

15. Restoration of Middle Management Structures in Schools

15.1 The TUI reached an agreement with the Department some 4 years ago that middle management structures would be gradually restored to pre-austerity levels. This agreement has not been honoured by the Department of Education. Now, more than ever, we need these supports at school level.

15.2 In addition, a dedicated post for the growing range of COVID-19 related duties should also be provided to allow principals and deputy principals to engage fully in the business of leading teaching and learning.

16. Reduction in Workload – Teachers

16.1 95% of respondents to the TUI survey indicated that there has been an increase in their workload in the new academic year as a result of preparing/adapting classes for the new workplace environment, while 95% also said that their work was significantly more difficult compared to 12 months ago.

16.2 92% of teachers believe that wearing a face covering during class makes their work more difficult or significantly more difficult. Therefore, the TUI is calling for a national procurement process for the purchase of voice amplifiers for teachers. The cost of such an initiative would be modest but the benefit considerable.

16.3 86% of respondents found that the preparation, delivery and associated work involved in emergency remote teaching took more time or much more time than face-to-face delivery.

16.4 The last thing a school needs is a high level of absenteeism due to teachers being overburdened with unnecessary demands. Now is not the time for ill-judged new demands (administrative work/excessive record-keeping).

17. Necessary adjustments to curriculum

- 17.1 The TUI welcomes the adjustments made by the State Examinations Commission to the assessments for state examinations in 2021. However, further adjustment to assessments and/or adjustments to curriculum content may also be required as circumstances unfold. We are already receiving credible reports that, owing to the nature of some syllabi, it will not be possible, in the environment imposed by COVID-19, to cover what is expected. We call on the NCCA and the Minister for Education to address these issues without delay.
- 17.2 Guidance is also needed on how to deliver syllabi and conduct assessments safely in the context of COVID-19. For example, the prevailing circumstances and compliance with public health advice mean that teaching methodologies and assessment methods have had to change. A very simple example is that - of necessity - there is much less scope for group work activities. Advice and guidance is needed urgently in this regard.

18. Leaving Certificate 2021

- 18.1 The TUI urgently calls upon the Minister for Education to provide clarity in relation to the Leaving Certificate State Examinations in 2021. The independently assessed, highly trusted, state certified Leaving Certificate examinations must proceed in June 2021. Our members engaged in the 2020 Calculated Grades process on a good faith, once-off basis and sought and received certain assurances. Unfortunately, the Department breached that trust. That being the case, future trust-based collaboration will be extremely difficult.

Conclusion

- 19.1 The TUI will continue to operate in accordance with the relevant public health advice. However, Government must provide us with the certainty, clarity, information and resources that we require to protect our members and, thereby, keep schools open. We will not put our students, their families, their communities and teachers at risk.
- 19.2 The Department of Education needs to engage with us in a manner that builds and maintains trust and confidence. It is not satisfactory that we first hear of plans and initiatives via the media. If we are truly in this together, that must be demonstrated by all concerned.