



21 October 2020

Dear Principal and staff,

As we approach the mid-term break, I am writing to thank you all for the enormous effort made by everyone to re-open our schools and to sustain that re-opening over the first half of this term. I also write to assure you of the government's ongoing commitment to sustaining the safe opening of schools.

I know that as the country moves into Level 5 of the Living with Covid Plan, our school communities will naturally have questions. I want to let you know directly, that a significant factor in the decision to move to Level 5 is that by doing so we can support our schools to continue to operate safely and sustainably during the pandemic.

In recommending that schools remain open during Level 5 restrictions, even in the current trajectory of the disease, the National Public Health Emergency Team has considered the national experience of school reopening to date, including the epidemiological data and information gathered through case and outbreak management.

The Government's decision recognises the overwhelming evidence from our public health experts, that schools are a safe environment for you, our school communities, both students and staff members.

The safety and wellbeing of everyone in our schools is of paramount importance to me. My colleagues in government and I have been provided with very strong evidence from public health, that the transmission rates of Covid-19 in schools are low, much lower than the rate currently in the community.

This is a result of the effectiveness of the public health guidelines for schools and a significant testament to all of you in our school communities and your successful implementation of an adherence to the guidelines.

- As of 19 October, latest data from public health shows that 10,513 students and teachers have been involved in mass testing. This has resulted in the detection of 246 additional cases. This equates to a positive detection rate of two per cent of additional detected cases.

In other words, where mass testing has been carried out of close contacts of confirmed cases in the school setting, the virus has not been detected in ninety eight per cent of these tests. This testing has only resulted in a small number of additional confirmed cases, not all of which are transmitted within the school setting.

- This rate is remaining much lower than the comparable positive detection rate in the community, which is over seven per cent. Public Health has confirmed that they are casting their net wide with mass testing in schools to assess evidence of levels of transmission and that this low rate supports other evidence that schools are safe environment for staff and students.



- There was no significant change in the proportion of total weekly COVID-19 cases attributable to school-aged children (4-18 years) before (August, weeks 32-35 inclusive) and after reopening of schools (14.3% and 14.1% respectively), supporting the hypothesis that children are not at increased risk from COVID-19 in the school setting.

Ninety per cent of schools have not had any dealings with public health at this stage which is very reassuring. Some of our schools have dealt with the challenge of positive cases among the school community, and have experienced the support of our public health teams in following the *Schools Pathway for COVID-19, the Public Health approach*. As the weeks progress this support has been enhanced and has become more streamlined. This system is refined and improved on an ongoing basis, taking on board feedback from schools that have used it on what works best and what needs to change.

Our sector has experienced real openness from public health in listening and adapting, and I thank our colleagues in the health services very much for this flexibility and collegiality, that will improve the experience for everyone as we continue to rely on their support.

The Department of Education and Skills has been meeting regularly with the education partners including management bodies, teachers' unions and representatives of the school communities, to provide them with up to date information and to offer an opportunity to discuss any concerns which they may have. This important and worthwhile engagement will continue in the weeks and months ahead. The Department has engaged regularly with public health and has fed back developments to stakeholder representative bodies at these meetings.

The public health response to schools will be further enhanced by the HSE through the increased resourcing of dedicated School Teams in each HSE area to assist schools where a positive case of Covid-19 is identified.

These teams are being led by public health professionals and will be supported by the Department of Education and Skills.

I want to thank you all again, each and every member of the school team, for working so hard to implement and keep to the guidelines. This work is paying off, and I urge everyone to remain vigilant.

We have learned through research and direct experience that closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family and societal level. Your efforts are valued and appreciated by the Department, as well as by the students and their families.

Thank you again, and I wish you all an enjoyable and well-deserved break over mid-term.

Le gach dea ghuí,

Norma Foley TD
Minister for Education.