



INCLUSION IRELAND

National Association for People with an Intellectual Disability

Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid – 19 Response

The re-opening of schools

September 2nd 2020

**This document is written in font 12 Verdana in line with Inclusion
Ireland plain English guidelines**

Introduction

I would like to start by thanking the chairperson, members and clerk of the committee for the invite to address you here today.

Established in 1961, Inclusion Ireland is a national, rights-based advocacy organisation that works to promote the rights of people with an intellectual disability.

To inform this submission, Inclusion Ireland conducted a short survey of 267 parents of children with disabilities on the re-opening of schools.

Re-engaging with school

Inclusion Ireland welcomes the re-opening of schools and acknowledges the hard work of school staff over the summer period to make it happen. It is important for children to re-engage in education and the social interactions that schools bring. This is especially true for children with disabilities.

In May of this year, parents told Inclusion Ireland how home schooling was not working for their child with a disability. Parents were working from home, they had more than one child at home and many children could not engage in education in the home. Now, with the re-opening of schools, 51.5% of parents responding to an Inclusion Ireland survey report regression in their child's education and personal development. This lost ground can often prove difficult to make back.

The vast majority (87.5%) of children with disabilities will be back to full time education with 9.5% back part time and 3% indicate they will be engaging with full time remote learning.

Worries of parents

80% of parents surveyed are worried about sending their child back to school during this Covid-19 period. The levels of worry in children is much less with 54% having no worry about returning to school.

Concerns for parents include anxiety and the risks around Covid-19, no social distancing on school transport and a lack of good information from the school and Department of Education and Skills (DES).

Despite their obvious concerns, 86% of parents say they will be sending their child back into school.

29 respondents to our survey report their child will not return to school due to high medical needs. Our previous survey in May found that remote learning was not working for these children. Inclusion Ireland raised this issue at this committee on June 25th and have written to and met the Minister. At present, no satisfactory provisions are in place to ensure this small cohort have access to appropriate education.

While schools are encouraged to create 'class bubbles' many children share a SNA who may be allocated to children in separate classrooms.

Access to resources

Schools are being informed to keep class groups together in 'bubbles'. It must be noted that this impacts a child with a disability greater than their peers. Parents report being told they will have no access to supports such as HSE therapy services in school (57%), the visiting teacher service, a NEPS assessment and resource teaching supports.

Inclusion Ireland is concerned that resource teachers will be used to cover absences of colleagues.¹ While welcome additional resources have been made available, teachers will have to stay off work once they display any type of 'cold like' symptoms as a precaution. This will place additional burden on the substitute panel as we approach winter. Resource teachers will then be used as cover. As we have already noted, parents are reporting regression in their child. Children with disabilities need additional supports to make up lost ground and not the possibility of losing out on vital resource teaching supports.

HSE therapy supports and the visiting teaching service are vital educational supports for children with disabilities. The DES and partners need to look at alternative means such as tele-health for the delivery of these vital supports.

Communication

57% of respondents to our survey were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with communications from the Department of Education and Skills. Communication from schools was much better received.

A number of parents commented that the DES guidelines were so vague that schools were having difficulty working them out, especially in relation to children with disabilities.

Respondents stated they were in the dark about school transport arrangements, sensory breaks, access to mainstream from a special class and communication needs with so many people wearing face coverings. Parents are worried about school transport. Many children travel great distances of up to 2 hours to special schools and classes with little or no social distancing.

¹ Circular 0045 – 2020, Department of Education and Skills.

Conclusion and recommendations

Inclusion Ireland acknowledges the hard work of schools to re-open but parents have expressed some concerns about their children returning to school. There also remains an unresolved difficulty for children who have high medical needs.

1. Resource teachers must not be diverted from their posts. The DES must ensure there is adequate cover in local substitute panels. Children with disabilities have experienced regression in skills that requires this vital support to make up any lost ground.
2. SNAs must be allocated per class and not between classes. If this requires additional resources, the DES must make these available on a case by case basis.
3. The DES must develop comprehensive support guidelines for children who cannot attend school due to their medical needs or a parent's medical needs. This should include access to the Home Tuition Scheme in person or by remote means.
4. The DES and partners must examine how previous external supports can be delivered. These supports include health therapies, visiting teachers, NEPS assessments
5. Many children will require access to sensory breaks, and this must be accommodated. The DES must also examine if children can continue their journey into mainstream classes where this has already begun and issue guidance on same.



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



pobal

government supporting communities



Inclusion Ireland receives funding from the Government through the Scheme to Support National Organisations via Pobal to do this work.