



8th January 2020

Re: Closure of Special Schools and Classes - Request for urgent meeting

Dear Minister Foley,

We note with severe disappointment yesterday's announcement that the planned re-opening of special schools and special classes for children with special educational needs on Monday will now not take place.

The announcement has left families and children with special educational needs reeling. This morning families are worried about what further regression and distress will be experienced during another potentially lengthy closure period with no plan on how these children can be supported by the State.

We are seeking an urgent meeting on behalf of students with special educational needs and their families to discuss measures that can be introduced and arrangements that can be put in place to mitigate this situation for children. We understand that you are meeting with key stakeholders today – it is vital that children with a disability are represented and included. We have had a number of positive engagements with Minister Madigan this week, and we are grateful for the assistance, however there is no doubt that these issues now fall under the remit of your Department.

Over 18,000 young people have once again been left behind in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst across Europe, governments and education partners have prioritised vulnerable young people, once again children with additional needs, many of whom are unable to learn online, have been left to suffer. The loss of in-school support has a major developmental impact on our children - one they will feel throughout their lives. We know that 61% of autistic young people lost key skills in areas such as communication, social interaction, self-regulation and personal care during the last lockdown period.

It is incumbent on us all to work together to find a solution to prevent any further damage being done during this lockdown. We are now 10 months

into this pandemic, and it is unacceptable that no contingency plans are in place to support students with special educational needs. In-school supports are and have happened safely in other jurisdictions, and have operated safely here and have not been found to breach public health guidelines. They are an essential service just like disability day care settings

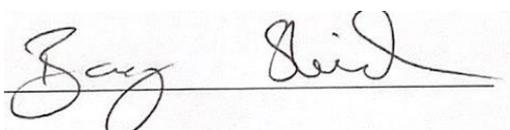
We are calling for Home Tuition to be made available to every student enrolled in special class and school and to students in mainstream education who are unable to learn remotely. Furthermore, we need to see how the Department has learned from the last school closure period when our young people suffered greatly - we need assurances that teachers will provide one-to-one support remotely, that communication from the Departments and schools will be clear and consistent and that the expert agencies of the Department will be available to advise parents and support young people in the days ahead.

The lack of communication to date has caused huge distress to families and children. We are once again requesting an urgent meeting to bridge that gap. We look forward to engaging with you further on this critical issue.

With best wishes,



Adam Harris
Founder-CEO
AsIAM – Ireland’s National Autism Charity



Barry Sheridan
CEO Down Syndrome Ireland



Enda Egan
CEO Inclusion Ireland

CC Minister Josepha Madigan, Minister of State with responsibility for
Special Education and Inclusion