

An Ceann Comhairle

The Minister has ten minutes.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh)

Mar is eol don Teach, rinne mé cinneadh agus d'fhógair mé an cinneadh sin an tseachtain seo chaite-----

An Ceann Comhairle

Can the Members leaving the House do so quietly please?



Deputy Joe McHugh

Chuir mé an ardteistiméireacht ar athlá agus rinne mé an cinneadh fáchoinne córas úr na marcanna réamhbheartaithe agus an t-eolas fáchoinne na tuismitheoirí agus na mic léinn atá i gceist anois. Sin an fáth go raibh mé ag obair le mo chuid oifigeach ar an phlean sin agus bhí mé ag an chruinniú ar maidin leis na páirtithe leasmhara éagsúla sna meánscoileanna. Chomh maith leis sin, táimid ag obair ar phlean fáchoinne na scoileanna a oscailt i mí Meán Fómhair agus beidh cruinniú le fóram na mbunscoileanna ar maidin agus leis na páirtithe leasmhara meánscoileanna Dé hAoine seo chugainn.

I look forward to the debate and the opportunity to outline the work that my Department and the education sector as a whole have continued to undertake. I know Deputies have contributions to make or questions to ask and I will do my best to provide as much information as I can today.

Last Friday, I made what is certainly one of the most difficult recommendations to Cabinet that a Minister for Education and Skills has ever had to make. Everyone in this House is well aware that it was my absolute preference to undertake the written and practical examinations. My preference, and the preference of the majority of those here and the majority of education stakeholders, was to hold the exams in June, as normal. When this proved impossible we developed a plan B which moved them to July and August. I also instructed officials in my Department to start evaluating all options, as I believed we needed options depending on how the fight against the virus developed.

Working in partnership with groups representing students, parents, teachers and management bodies through an advisory group I established, every effort was made to run the 2020 leaving certificate in a manner as close as possible to the way it was originally intended to be held and the way leaving certificate students expected. However I received compelling evidence, based on health advice and other assessments, that the examinations could not be held in a reliable and valid manner, nor in a way that would be equitable for students.

I want to be very clear about the options which faced me.

I was acutely conscious of the disadvantage that some students faced and the impact a lack of time in school has had in recent weeks. This is an important issue, which many Deputies had raised with me over the past weeks.

As we worked with the State Examinations Commission through the practicalities of what it would mean to run exams in ways that complied with the advice of the Department of Health, including social distancing requirements to protect public health, it became evident that exams in July and August would be a very different experience to the one we think of when we picture the leaving certificate examination. It would not be the exam experience which

students had prepared for and would have had an expectation of sitting before this crisis hit. The State Examinations Commission advised me that the examinations would not be comparable to the leaving certificate in any other year, potentially involving the need for students to wear masks and gloves when sitting exams, superintendents requiring PPE, and the prospect of exam papers having to be redesigned to such an extent that they would have been unrecognisable when compared to what students had spent two years preparing for. All this raised fundamental issues of fairness.

In addition to issues of fairness and physical health, I also had to give regard to the mental health and well-being of our young people. I was given advice by my Department's National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, about the anxiety, stress and trauma being experienced by young people in the midst of this terrible pandemic. To help people understand the issues which lay behind this decision, my Department has published this advice from NEPS alongside information on what running the exams in a way that complied with social distancing requirements would have entailed.

The leaving certificate is important but it is life that matters. The system which has been put in place, plan C, will allow students to progress to the next stage of their life in a timely fashion. There is no easy solution to the difficulties we face here. This new system will require a special unit to be established within the Department of Education and Skills to carry out this work, as the State Examinations Commission does not have the authority to do it, but it is the fairest, most equitable and just way to meet the challenges that we now face in the current circumstances. It is without a doubt a better way than any other option that exists. It offers all students the option of calculated grades for the 2020 leaving certificate. It is crucial that it also guarantees them the right to sit the examinations at a later stage when it is safe to hold the exams in the normal way.

I welcome the very positive support and engagement that we have received from all education stakeholders as we work collaboratively to implement this process in the interest of all learners. I acknowledge the work of the Irish Second-Level Students Union, the National Parents Council, both teachers' unions and the management bodies in developing this solution. I look forward to working with them in tackling the next set of challenges that Covid-19 has presented to the education sector. I also thank those many students, teachers, career guidance counsellors, principals and parents with whom I have discussed this challenge, along with other experts in this area, including Dr. Niall Muldoon, the Ombudsman for Children. I also thank Margaret Rogers of Heart Children Ireland, among many others. I greatly appreciated the open engagement of some of the 16,000 students who engaged with me through the SpunOut Instagram interview. I acknowledge the leadership shown by the teachers, principals and boards of management in schools across the country in keeping the school communities together and ensuring continuation of learning for students at all levels.

The roadmap to the reopening of our society and economy sets out the intention that pupils and students would return to their classrooms and lecture theatres in time for the start of the 2020-21 academic year. How this return will be managed and how the public health advice at the time will be implemented will be worked through over the coming months in consultation with the education stakeholders. My officials are working on these issues. It is important to state this is not just about social distancing in schools, numbers in classrooms or lecture theatres but also is about how we plan learning, staff our schools, utilise facilities within schools, transport pupils to and from schools and protect those who might be vulnerable to the virus.

I am conscious that the national return to work safely protocol launched last weekend clearly and comprehensively sets out the steps and processes that employers must take to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 in the workplace. It will form part of our considerations. Access to

schools will be allowed from Monday, 18 May. While this is not a return to work within the meaning of the protocol, it will allow staff to access the school where needed to support continuity of teaching and learning.

To assist with the development of contingency plans for the reopening and operation of schools in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements, the Department will engage with relevant stakeholders and experts from within the education sector. A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can reopen and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

We will work with all relevant stakeholders as we plan to reopen educational institutions. Earlier I met the advisory group on State examinations to discuss these issues. The Primary Education Forum also met remotely to consider the issues in the primary sector and I will discuss that meeting with my officials after this debate. I want to build on the good working relationship developed in the advisory group and on the ongoing success of the Primary Education Forum in addressing the challenges this virus has raised. In addition, the advisory group on post-primary education will meet again this coming Friday to discuss school reopening.

We will examine practices in other countries that have reopened their schools and colleges to learn from their experiences. I will also attend the next remote meeting of education Ministers on 18 May to discuss these issues with my European counterparts.

We have approximately 4,000 schools across the country, ranging from the smallest one and two-teacher schools to those with more than 1,000 students. We must also consider these issues in the range of diverse settings in the higher and further education and training sector. I am particularly conscious of pupils who might be starting school for the first time, those transitioning from primary to post-primary, and those with special educational needs. These are students who will need particular support or attention in how they return to school. They are students who will not have met their classmates or teachers previously and will not have the ready made bonds in place that we might take for granted. With regard to those starting primary school, my officials are engaging with officials from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to consider how best to support that transition.

New schools are due to open in September and there are many schools building projects associated with those openings as well as extensions and new buildings across the country that were originally due to open this September. The reopening of the construction sector offers the opportunity to advance the work on these projects.

These are the challenges we will work through over the coming months, guided by public health advice, the views of stakeholders and what is in the best interests of the pupils and students across the country, especially those starting for the first time in primary, post-primary or third level, as these events are major signposts in the life of any child or young person and we will be conscious of that as we plan for the future.

The further and higher education sectors have also been addressing the challenges presented by Covid-19. The roadmap to reopening our society also provides the framework through which these sectors can deliver education and training in the autumn. The decisions on the leaving certificate also allow the sectors to plan for new entrants with greater certainty. I know there are other issues, including funding, particularly in the university sector, and again these issues are being worked through by engagement. There are other issues which I have not touched upon, but I am sure will be addressed in the debate.

Deputy Thomas Byrne

Táim le mo chuid ama a roinnt le mo chomhghleacaithe, na Teachtaí Pádraig Ó Súilleabháin, Norma Ní Fhoghlú agus Aindrias Ó Muineacháin, an ceathrar againn.

An Ceann Comhairle

Is that agreed? Agreed.



Deputy Thomas Byrne

I welcome the fact that a decision has been made to provide certainty on the leaving certificate. There are still issues in that regard which my colleagues and Deputies across the House will address, but we have finally moved past the uncertainty. Members of the Minister's advisory group on State examinations have put forward their own queries, including the unions, the management bodies, parents councils and students. It would be helpful if those queries were published on the Department's website and if the responses to the queries were also published and collated in an accessible form. That would be useful because I am aware some of the bodies and their experts have put forward dozens of questions. The Minister will probably also get the same here in today.

What is clear, as was inevitable all along, is that the cancellation of the leaving certificate was absolutely necessary. The Minister acknowledged that the public health advice necessitated the cancellation. Many of us mentioned the impact on mental well-being in the House on 23 April and that has now been confirmed by the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS. Other issues include broadband and technology access, which is mentioned in the WHO return-to-school plan.

We are one of the few jurisdictions that did not set out a national e-learning platform; we simply gave schools a list of apps. While the Minister is right to praise teachers and students for what they have been doing with regard to remote learning, they really have not received the level of assistance from the State that was received in other countries and jurisdictions. They have been, and are, working against the odds.

The Minister has put forward a system of calculated grades. We want the class of 2020, their rights and their progression through education to be protected to the best of the State's ability. These calculated grades differ slightly from the system I suggested but I accept the reason the Department has given for putting this system forward. The vast majority of teachers are willing to step up to the plate and to award these calculated grades in light of this year being exceptional. They are certainly worried and concerned about it but we know from their representative bodies that they will do it.

It has to be said, however, that there are heartfelt concerns about how the Department proposes to adjust grades. I am concerned about this. There is no evidence in the Minister's statement to the Dáil that the Department is consulting with outside experts with regard to the models to be used for this process and I believe it is not. The Minister has set out that the State Examinations Commission is, under statute, not allowed to get involved in this. That is a major flaw that must be rectified at the earliest possible opportunity. There are expertise and people within the State Examinations Commission who would be of considerable assistance to this whole process and who could provide necessary help. There is expertise in the inspectorate and the Department but, considering the scale of the project and the legal vulnerabilities the Minister has introduced, independent expert advice to the Minister and Department is absolutely essential in the setting up of the model to ensure that no one will be advantaged or disadvantaged by it. The model must be used simply to standardise, to ensure the system is working and to ensure that teachers' predictions, which the Department has said

are key, form the basis of children's calculated grades. It is imperative that independent expert advice be given.

I worry that the entire emphasis is on the education partners. I hope the Minister will not get me wrong; the education partners are absolutely critical. They have been very co-operative and hardworking during this pandemic, as have partners in all sectors of society. The Minister does, however, need separate advice with regard to statistics, modelling and data to inform him as to how to do this particular job and to make sure that all t's are crossed and i's dotted so that there will be fewer complaints later on in the summer. The Minister should have a short independent consultation with statisticians and other experts to ensure a further level of scrutiny of the methodology used. I ask the Minister to commit to the Dáil that he will seek such expert input.

I have spoken about protecting students and their grades but we also need to protect teachers. The Minister has spoken about guidelines with regard to canvassing and so on. That will not be a problem for most people. There will be one or two people who will feel they can benefit from such actions. I call on people not to engage with teachers with regard to exam results. The vast majority of the public will accept that call from all of us here. I do not believe, however, that guidelines will be enough for some.

The Minister said that his plan has legal vulnerabilities. I say that teachers need protections. I have concerns about the recognition of qualifications. This is a State certificate equivalent to the leaving certificate but it is not the leaving certificate. These issues need to be addressed through legislation. The class of 2020 needs greater numbers of students to get greater numbers of college places.

I wanted to raise a number of other issues, including the issue of special needs education. I will not get a huge amount of time. The Minister has mentioned it but it deserves a debate of its own.

The Minister again needs outside expert advice with regard to school reopenings. The WHO has published guidelines on this. These are not as restrictive as we may have feared. The Minister needs to be clear in the message that he is doing everything possible to get our schools open at the appropriate time. We need continuity of education. We do not have e-learning set up. It simply will not work on a long-term basis. It is a giant social experiment at the moment. Our kids need to be back in class in September. We need a clear statement from the Government that this will happen. Keeping us up to date in an open and transparent way is absolutely essential. I will yield to my colleagues as I believe I have run out of time.



Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan

I wish to put questions to the Minister on a number of aspects. As he knows, for 15 years I was a schoolteacher, as was Deputy Foley from Kerry. We have a number of questions specific to the leaving certificate. In the context of where we are at with Covid-19, we fully understand this was a difficult decision for the Minister and it did not come lightly. He is moving with the public health advice as it comes. We understand the move was meant to bring greater certainty, particularly to the students sitting the leaving certificate this year. Obviously a number of questions remain outstanding.

Deputy Byrne alluded to issues with the standardisation of results. The document the Minister circulated last week essentially suggested there would be profiling of schools. Students and teachers are concerned that schools in disadvantaged areas could struggle based on the model that might be employed. I ask the Minister to clarify issues around that kind of modelling.

I seek clarification on the people who will actually sit the exams whenever that may be. We are phasing in the times when people may go for a cup of coffee, a haircut or whatever it might be. At the same time we cannot give our students an indication of when they may be able to sit an exam. The majority of phone calls I have received over the last week have been from parents whose children are particularly concerned that they would like to sit the exam as quickly as possible. I know that is the Minister's intention pending public health advice. At the same time, we need to look at alternative facilities, such as a remote online exam in front of a webcam, to provide certainty for students. We cannot let this roll on until the new year or until March of next year. People's lives are at stake. There is potential for students to lose an entire year in their academic life. I would like the Minister to address that issue.

The issue of children who are home-schooled comes up quite a bit. They do not have the same experience as other students of being in a conventional learning environment and sitting the same types of exams on a regular basis. What accommodation will be made for those students?

The late change of levels is a feature of the lives of all leaving certificate students. A teacher will always recommend a student to stay with higher level for as long as possible, right up to after the mock exams or maybe later in the year after Easter. Ultimately they make the determination to drop or change a level at the last minute. How will those students be accommodated? As I read it, they cannot or will not be accommodated. I ask the Minister to clarify that also.

On the grading of non-curricular subjects, such as Polish, Romanian and other minority languages, many students will sit those exams with little or no guidance from a teacher in the entire two-year period. How will those students be accommodated in the leaving certificate?

On the rescinding of the results for the oral examinations, when the Minister first made the declaration that students would get 100%, as an Irish teacher, I felt very uncomfortable with that. Certain people who worked very hard would have deserved that result, but other students who might not have worked quite as hard would have attained the same result. What has changed? What advice has the Minister been given in the meantime to lead him to change tack on that front?

Deputy Byrne also mentioned the lobbying of teachers and principals on results. We know the vast majority of people and parents will abide by the result that is given. I believe that if teachers are pressured or schools come under some kind of interference from external sources, some kind of regime of sanctions is needed. I am not sure guidelines are sufficient. It would be a very rare occasion that this would happen, but there needs to be a deterrent for people engaging in such practice.

The big bone of contention I have is with fifth year students going into sixth year. They need to be given clarity. They have already lost ten to 12 weeks of teaching and time with their teachers in their schools. In September, they could potentially be operating on a reduced timetable. We do not know what will happen then. I would like the Minister to clarify the plans for fifth year students going into their leaving certificate year. Will they be facing a reduced exam schedule or a more refined syllabus?



An Ceann Comhairle

Deputies Thomas Byrne and Pádraig O'Sullivan have asked several intelligent and pertinent questions. However, there are two more speakers for Fianna Fáil and 3.4 minutes remaining. The time allocated is for the Minister to take questions and answer them. How do the Fianna

Fáil Deputies propose we proceed? Are we to take the questions as rhetorical? The Deputies have indicated they wish for answers to be provided in writing.



Deputy Norma Foley

Is aoibhinn beatha an scoláire, a deir an dán. Is é sin mar a bhí, b'fhéidir, ach ní mar sin atá anois, in aon chor. "Aoibhinn Beatha an Scoláire", an often-quoted 17th century poem, suggests that the life of a student is beautiful and idyllic. It has now changed irrevocably. The suite of changes recently announced by the Department is seismic in nature and unquantifiable in its magnitude and future impact on the education system. I profoundly regret that the plan B option of hosting the traditional leaving certificate did not come to pass. Although it is flawed in a few respects, there is an essential fairness and equity at the core of the leaving certificate that is unmatched in any other type of exam. It is independent and anonymous. Chief among its many advantages is that it is immune to perceived manipulation. It is of enormous disappointment to me that until the clarification provided by the Minister today, there had been no quantifiable and verifiable evidence of a concerted effort by the Department to implement plan B.

The proposal to hand is a leaving certificate adjudicated on the basis of calculated grades. I acknowledge the co-operation of all stakeholders who are working with the Minister to make this a reality. I refer in particular to teachers, many of whom have principled objections to assessment on the basis of calculated grades but who, in recognition of these extraordinary times, have agreed to implement this extraordinary measure. I hope the Minister and the Department will be mindful and demonstrably appreciative of that co-operation in the months and years ahead.

There are myriad questions I wish to pose but time does not allow. I have submitted many of them as parliamentary questions. I ask the Minister to confirm his commitment to indemnify all teachers as they embark on the calculated grades process. I ask that he commit to reinstating the 100% grade he previously offered for aspects of the Irish, foreign language and music exams and extend that to practicals, projects and course work. How does he propose to accommodate students who take a subject outside of school, as referred to by Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan? What is the status of students who plan to sit the written exams, possibly in 2021? Will they have to engage with schools in that regard? I ask the Minister to give details on the newly commissioned special unit of the Department which will have oversight of the calculated grades. On the reopening of schools, will he commit to additional staff allocation and increased accommodation for all schools?

To be parochial, I will conclude on an issue in my constituency. I ask the Minister to commit to the provision of transport for 19 students in Annascaul, County Kerry, who require transport to their preferred local school. I have written to the Minister and the Minister of State on the issue.

Is aoibhinn beatha an scoláire. Is é sin mar a bhí, ach ní mar sin atá anois. B'fhéidir go mbeidh arís, má éiríonn linn go léir an dúshlán nua a shárú. Gabhaim buíochas.



Deputy Aindrias Moynihan

Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom mo chomhghairdeas a ghabháil leis an gCeann Comhairle as a bheith atofa. Léiríonn an vóta ollmhór an t-ardmheas atá ag na daoine go léir air. I wish to thank the people of Cork North-West for their trust and support in the election. It was some time ago but this is my first opportunity to speak in the Thirty-third Dáil. I wish to acknowledge their support and thank my campaign team.

Students who appeal the decision on their exam results, and then go on to sit the written exam and get the minimum requirements, will wish to begin college that year. What level of engagement has the Minister had with colleges to ensure students who achieve the minimum requirements in the exam will be able to take up a place in college in the coming academic year, possibly after Christmas?

The Minister briefly touched on the issue of the patronage of new schools. The patronage procedure for a new second-level school in Ballincollig, in my own area, was expected to be well under way at this stage. The school was due to open in 2021. Parents who will be enrolling their children for first year in the autumn need to know what options will be available to them. They will be able to enrol them in Ballincollig Community School or Coláiste Choilm.

What will the situation be? Will the process for the new patronships and new schools be back up and running quickly and when will they know who the patrons for the new schools will be?



Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire

I will break my contribution into two parts: leaving certificate and other issues and I have allowed about a minute and half after each for the Minister to respond, if that is alright. Some of what I say will be critical so I want to preface it by saying that I understand the Minister and the Department are in a very difficult situation, that all the options were difficult and the decisions were taken in good faith but that does not mean that we should not interrogate them.

Leaving certificate students have endured uncertainty and incredible anxiety. It has been quite an ordeal for many of them. I have said on many occasions that the exam should not go ahead if it was not in the interests of the health and welfare of students to do so. It was right in that context to cancel the written exams. I am not convinced, however, that the right alternative was chosen. Predicted or calculated grades are far from reliable, even where they have long been built into the system and have a basis and track record in standardised classwork, recent State exam and predictions being part of university applications. Here we have none of those things. Teachers are working with students who had no expectation that their pre-exams, mock exams or Christmas tests could potentially carry the weight they now do. There are plenty of students who know they can turn the gas on late in the year. There are also many students who are repeating a subject, including, for example, people who want to train as teachers, and are doing the leaving certificate subject outside traditional school settings, including native speakers of minority languages who may not have had any formal tuition at all. This is a major issue. How will those students get their grades and in general, across schools, what is the guidance going to be on what material can be used to devise a calculated grade? I recognise the determination of teachers to be fair and do right by their students. I know they will do all they can to make this work and they are absolutely right. It would be far worse for this cohort not to proceed. There are, however, better ways. I asked the Minister, by e-mail, before he made the decision, to explore expanding third level

education as a partial solution, with students getting their first choice and being assessed by universities only where a course was entirely oversubscribed, separate from a leaving certificate award. Many of the 14,000 students who come here annually from abroad will likely not be coming here next year.

Tá costas leis sin ach ós rud é go mbeidh na hollscoileanna amháin thíos €374 milliún an bhliain seo, is cinnte go mbeidh cúnamh airgeadúil ag teastúil uathu. Mar chuid de sin cén fáth nach bhféadfaí a thuilleadh spásanna á gcur ar fáil, ina measc le tacaíocht bhreise do SUSI thiar agus thoir chun an fhadhb seo a réiteach. I have written to the Minister about Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, and I am still waiting for a reply. It needs to be expanded because in respect of income thresholds many parents are in an uncertain position not knowing whether or when the bar or shop they work in will reopen.

I have raised my concerns about school profiling with the Minister. It needs to be dropped. It would be one thing if all else among schools was equal, apart from results, but schools in fact magnify the disadvantage felt by communities. Students who deserve the chance to do a life-changing course will miss out and students who should not fail a subject or the leaving certificate will fail and that is totally wrong. Tackling the disadvantages that have worsened in recent weeks involves opening up access, not closing it down. I will give the Minister a minute and a half to respond to this part of the question.



Deputy Joe McHugh

There were a lot of questions there and I will try to rattle through them as best I can. In respect of the challenges of tutors outside school, I do not want to put out information before it is decided because we will be in a position next week to give guidance to schools. That information is critical but we have identified students who, for example, are taking music and have a music tutor outside school, and that tutor will be involved in the assessment process. That is important. We have also identified an issue for students at home who do not have a tutor and we will consider them on a case-by-case basis.

We will be in a position next week to answer the Deputy's second question on guidance. The patron bodies, management bodies and the unions have been given two clear messages: this has to be done very quickly but it has to be done right to ensure that teachers cannot be compromised and to ensure fairness at the heart of these decisions.

There is very positive engagement with the third level sector and there is flexibility. Yes, there will be a natural availability of courses because there may be fewer international students. I thank the different leaders in third level for their flexibility.

Bhí an Teachta ag labhairt faoi na hollscoileanna fosta agus i dtaobh na faidhbe maidir le SUSI. Tá comhrá de dhíth maidir céard a bheidh ag tarlú an bhliain agus an téarma seo chugainn i mí Mheán Fómhair. Is cinnte go bhfuil na tuismitheoirí, na daoine eile agus na mic léinn faoi bhrú faoi na poist agus an bhearna atá ann.

An Ceann Comhairle

Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Táimid ag dul ar aghaidh go dtí an Teachta Tully anois.



Deputy Joe McHugh

Finally, as it is important, may I make this point on the disadvantaged schools and the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS scheme? DEIS status exists for a reason, which is to support those schools. Whenever I have visited a DEIS school in my 18 months in this job, and I have been in many, I speak individually to the teachers, the principals and students and they talk about the progress they are making. They are making progress on a year-to-year basis, and it is good progress. There might be, for example, an honours maths class in the school that was not there a year before. I assure Deputies these schools will not be disadvantaged by the progress they are making and I will keep that conversation very alive.

I wish to say something to the Deputy. This has been a very difficult time for many people, particularly the students and parents, and this has been a difficult decision. What helped the decision was individual contact by some Deputies in this House. I have spoken to the Deputy on the phone several times. While our parties might be as distant in economic policy as the Fanad lighthouse is far out, I acknowledge Deputy Ó Laoghaire for his constructive approach in this very important matter.



Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire

I thank the Minister and appreciate his making himself and his officials available for engagement on an ongoing basis. I am running tight on time but wish to flag something to which the Minister can respond in writing, rather than eating into Deputies Tully and Clarke's time. The pressure the parents of special needs children are under cannot be understated. The children's lives and routines have been turned upside down and they cannot understand it. They are frustrated and sad and often are falling further behind. Education is fundamentally about learning, stimulation and socialisation and lack of those is having a great impact on these children. How will the Minister resolve confusion regarding the redeployment of special needs assistants, SNAs? The issue has, unfortunately, been miscommunicated from the start. SNAs have had very little guidance and have had to work off their own initiative. There is now an issue in respect of vetting that is stopping people from being redeployed. They are frustrated by that and it needs to be resolved and clarified. There is also the matter of July provision, or something like it, being delivered remotely in a safe manner. I have also raised the lack of school spaces and unit spaces. That is an issue everywhere, including in my constituency.

Many parents with children who are finishing primary school and are going on to secondary school have contacted me, and the Minister addressed it in his opening remarks. They are worried because the children's primary education suddenly came to an end and their preparation for that transition did not happen. Now they do not know when that is going to start. It might not seem like the most urgent issue to some but to those parents and families, it is huge and is something that must be addressed.



Deputy Pauline Tully

As this is my maiden speech, I wish to take the opportunity to thank the people of Cavan, Monaghan and north Meath for their tremendous support for me and my party colleague, Deputy Carthy, at the general election on 8 February. After everything that has happened, it seems like a lifetime ago now. I never envisaged it would be more than three months before I would get to make my maiden speech but we live in unprecedented times.

I will comment on the alternative to the leaving certificate and I have some questions. As I do not think time will allow an oral response, I request a written response. I believe replacing the standard leaving certificate with calculated grades was the most viable option in the circumstances. The leaving certificate exam had been compromised once the school year was curtailed in mid-March, with too many inconsistencies for students. In some schools, courses were not completed, oral and practical exams could not proceed and course work could not be submitted. Many teachers attempted to engage with students online but the technology divide made this unfair. Expecting students to continue studying for more than two months on their own was unrealistic but then to extend that by an additional two months was unjust.

I believe that teachers will be fair to their students when calculating grades but I am relieved that teachers will do so in conjunction with their colleagues in their subject departments and with school management, which I see as both a support and a safeguard for students and teachers. However, it is imperative that the message that lobbying will disqualify goes out loud and clear, and I support the Teachers Union of Ireland, which called for that. It is not enough to simply give a guideline.

I categorically disagree with school profiling. I agree with my party colleague, Deputy Ó Laoghaire, on that issue. I seriously question the need for it and urge the Minister to reconsider that proposal.

Where a situation arises where a student is not happy with his or her calculated grade and wishes to sit the examination whenever that may be, how will the practical element of that subject be assessed? There are approximately ten subjects with practical examinations or course work attached, and languages which have an oral element. It would be very unfair to allocate a result based only on the written part of the examination, especially for the more practically-minded student.

Regarding students who cannot be given a predicted grade, such as external students, those who have been home schooled, some students who may be repeating in a different school from the one they originally attended or students who take additional subjects outside of school such as music, Russian, Polish or whatever it might, what is the option open to them? Is it to sit the actual examination whenever that is deemed safe to do so? However, if that is their only option, it is not fair to expect them to put off entering third level for a whole year if that is their intention. Can the timetable for the allocation of results be brought forward so that if there is only a relatively small number of students wishing to sit the examination, that could possibly happen safely in August?

An alternative course of action is to offer those students who wish to enter a third level course the option of sitting an aptitude test for the course they desire. That is an option that could be offered in respect of over-subscribed courses. It is used for mature students entering third level. Could that be considered for students in these times also?

I do not believe the leaving certificate applied course has been mentioned. The students taking that leaving certificate have already been allocated up to two thirds of their result, with

the end-of-year examinations making up the final one third. Are teachers being asked to predict their grade also? I believe they should be as it might possibly be the difference between a distinction and a merit or a merit and a pass.

Finally, I want to commiserate with leaving certificate students countrywide. They have been robbed of the chance to sit an examination for which they were preparing for up to two years. Most of them would have liked to sit the examination - a few might be happier with the turn of events - but they have been robbed of the final few years in school, their graduation and possibly their debts. I hope those events can take place later. I am coming from the perspective of a teacher. I believe I, too, will be predicting grades for students I taught up to the middle of January.

An Ceann Comhairle

I congratulate the Deputy on her maiden address. I call Deputy Clarke.

Deputy Sorca Clarke

I have a number of questions that I simply will not get to ask at this stage and I have more respect for myself, this House and the Ceann Comhairle than to start haggling when we run over time so I will be as brief as possible.

Deputy Joe McHugh

If the Deputy wants to put down all the questions I will get a formal response for her.



Deputy Sorca Clarke

Perfect.

Regarding the July provision programme, this programme is vital for ensuring that children with autism spectrum disorder, ASD, continue with some level of structured learning during the summer. All children will experience a level of difficulty settling back into the school when they reopen but for children on the spectrum, and children with severe to profound learning difficulties, that challenge will be multiple-fold and will cause unimaginable distress for the students and their families without supports being put in place. The longer these children remain out of school, the more difficult it will be to re-establish routine. These children will have to rebuild those vital skills necessary in terms of learning, social interaction and communication that they had before the pandemic. That is the reason the July provision is so important for these children. The loss of predictability, routine and structure is hard on anyone but for those on the spectrum and with additional needs, it is especially difficult.

Parents are doing their best but in terms of the contact I have had with them, one of them described the feeling as hanging on by their fingernails, and we are not even at the end of the school term. They feel ignored, that their children's needs are again at the lowest rung of priority for being addressed and that it is more of the same old, same old. They believe they will be going back to constantly having to battle for every single additional support their children need, whether it is psychological assessments or the right of their children to access appropriate education and supports. Will they have to go back to fighting for everything their children need? Will their children be pushed into reduced hours or forced to take a place in a

dedicated unit having done so well in mainstream school previously because they have lost those key skills?

Is this where we are? Is this what we are looking at? The Minister should be honest. I ask him to amend the July provision programme for this year, to bring it in later in the year and let it run in the weeks before schools reopen. That is what parents need. They know their children better than anyone else. The same can be said of their teachers. It is grossly unfair for anybody, whether a teacher or a parent, to expect a child with additional needs to land back in school having been six months out of school and to pick up where they were. In short, these children are looking not to be robbed of their potential for the coming school year.

I also raise the issue of the State Examinations Commission and the seasonal employees it employed in habitual contracts over the years. No contact has been made with those employees, which is not good enough. Common manners would dictate that contact should have been made with them. I will be in contact with the Minister about that issue again.

[An Ceann Comhairle](#)

I thank the Deputy. I believe Deputy Feighan is sharing time with colleagues.



[Deputy Frankie Feighan](#)

I am sharing with Deputy Higgins. I also welcome the Minister to the House. It has been an extraordinary and difficult time for students, parents, teachers and all other stakeholders. I have a few questions to which I would like a reply. There has been much talk from the post-primary advisory group that has been established. How has that worked? Will the Minister be using such advisory groups to address the problems of reopening schools? It has been a very stressful time for students and there is huge anxiety and stress among them. I worry about the health and welfare of the students. I want to come at this from a different angle. I understand that we are all at home, and the one thing I have been saying to my wife and kids is that when this is all over, we are going to go for a break. The tourism and hospitality sectors are under a lot of stress as well. They are due to open in mid-July. I do not know whether this would be helpful for the advisory group, but maybe it is time to look at bringing the schools back a little later, perhaps into September. That might give a window of opportunity of six or seven weeks in which everyone could avail of that break. If schools are coming back in mid-August, there will not be enough capacity for all families to take that break in Ireland. There will be no tourists coming in from outside the country. We are all going to be taking a break on the island of Ireland and I would encourage anyone from the Thirty-two Counties to go around and see our country. If the schools are coming back that little----

[Deputy Peadar Tóibín](#)

Overseas in Belfast.



[Deputy Frankie Feighan](#)

No, in our country. Fine Gael is a united Ireland party, as the Deputy well knows. If we had that extra time, it might ensure that we could keep all the various stakeholders, tourist facilities and students going. Extending the season for six weeks would give people that well-earned break they need, especially students.

An Ceann Comhairle

Is Deputy Higgins there? It is a bit like "Lanigan's Ball" here.



Deputy Emer Higgins

It is indeed. There are moments that are watersheds in all our lives, and completing primary school and secondary school are two of those moments. I still remember the days I left St. Martin's national school and Rathcoole community college. Many people cherish those moments. One of the most important aspects of education is the social one, and that is why. Students learn to make deep and meaningful friendships while spending years in the company of their classmates. It is always difficult to leave those bonds behind when classes disband at the end of sixth class and sixth year. It is even more difficult now.

The class of 2020 is deprived of the usual rites of passage. They will have no final day at school, no debs and no graduation. Sixth class students have spent eight of the 12 years of their lives - two-thirds of their lives - with their classmates. Sixth year students have spent six of the 17 years of their lives - over a third of their lives - with their current classmates. We already know that the lockdown is hurting our children and teenagers.

Anxiety levels and depression have gone through the roof. Right now, their support structure and social network are being pulled from under them. This is especially so for sixth class and sixth year students. Graduation is an occasion that deserves to be marked. It is an occasion that children in Lucan, Clondalkin, Palmerstown, Newcastle, Rathcoole and other places across the country want marked. It is an occasions their parents want marked. Will the Minister ensure that a graduation ceremony takes place for every sixth year and sixth class student when this crisis has passed?

I am also mindful of the pressures that families of children with special needs are under. Many parents are struggling to create new routines amid this crisis. Is the Minister planning any support for children with special needs between now and their return to school? It would be of significant benefit to these children and their families.



Deputy Joe McHugh

I thank the Deputies for their questions. Deputy Feighan raised the issue around the advisory group. The advisory group is a collection of management bodies, parent representative groups, student representative voices and the two main unions for the post-primary sector - the TUI and ASTI. The group has been working through a lot of issues and has met seven times. Each time it has met, it has discussed issues such as getting consensus on the junior cycle, mental health issues, and how the practicals and research projects would look in a leaving certificate setting. It also walked through the process of seeing what a leaving

certificate would look like under current public health guidelines. It has been a very important unit because this has not been an easy period in terms of trying to find a way through these very difficult decisions, but the unit has been really helpful. I met with it again today and we had a discussion around protections for teachers and fairness for students regarding calculated grades. The group will meet again on Friday to have a discussion about school reopenings. That will be a very important mechanism as we work our way through the summer. I thank the group members in particular for all their efforts and hard work during this emergency and crisis.

Deputy Feighan also asked where we are with school reopenings. The advice from NPHE is that schools will reopen in September, so we are working on that basis. We are working under current health advice. Obviously, health advice is subject to change, but we will work on the basis of current health advice. Whether that is social distancing or issues involving bus or other transportation requirements, we will work through that together. I know Deputies will continue to keep their voices heard with regard to where they see it going.

I will not get into a discussion as to when summer holidays should be or how they should happen, but I acknowledge one thing, which is that it has been such a disruption for society and families. We do not know where we are going to be in a month's time, never mind two months' time, as a society with regard to this pandemic, but we will work through it and continue to do so collectively.

I thank Deputy Higgins for raising two important issues regarding the completion of primary school and the rite of passage, as she calls it, from primary to secondary education as well as finishing the leaving certificate. Yes, there are traditions and rites of passage such as meeting for meals. Some schools have masses while others have other ways of celebrating that. I am getting a lot of contact from parents of students in primary school and primary school teachers regarding the rite of passage from sixth class to post-primary education. It is a big transition and step. Many sixth class students get a chance to go into post-primary schools for a few days to see what it is like, so it is a big transition. It is something which we are looking at to see how we could facilitate that transition to secondary school. I know the Deputy asked what my advice would be regarding graduations. Most schools do their own thing when it comes to graduations, but this will be an item of discussion.

It was an item of discussion with my officials when I met them this morning before the advisory group meeting.

A couple of Deputies raised the issue of July provision. We also had a meeting this morning about July provision and I am open to the idea of expanding the initiative. It is limited in its construction at the moment and a difficulty arises when different groups are excluded. We are looking at potential expansion and I will keep Deputies informed as to how we will move forward.

Turning to special needs in general, we are fortunate that so many special needs assistants have stayed in contact with their students. We want to ensure that we offer whatever extra support or facilitation we can. One of the discussions that I had with the Taoiseach, followed by discussions with the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, was about the fact that an all-of-Government response is needed, including the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Minister of State with responsibility for disability issues, the Department of Health and my Department. Meetings have taken place and I will keep the House updated on any developments in that regard.



Deputy Catherine Martin

This has been an extremely difficult time for children of all ages. Many primary school students across the country are missing out on their final months at school, missing rites of passage such as the final sports day in primary school, where those students are finally the senior members of the school and leading the school teams. They are missing out on taking the last school tour together as a sixth class group, something to which they all look forward. They are also missing out on an official graduation ceremony with their school communities and families and are being deprived of the basics of saying goodbye to the classmates, beside whom they have sat for eight years, before they move on to their various secondary schools. It is truly a distressing time for those students. Is an an-chorrach é seo do pháistí scoile de gach aois.

Many children find themselves in the bizarre situation of looking forward to putting on their uniforms again and going back to school. They never imagined that would happen. Usually in May, students look forward to casting their uniforms aside for three months but are now looking forward to putting them on again. They also look forward to the days when they can have birthday parties and play dates with friends in real life, not through Zoom or WhatsApp, and that is if they have the broadband to use those applications.

The past few months will, no doubt, have lasting and traumatising impacts on many young people. It is important that they are supported and protected as we move forward from this crisis.

It has been an unbelievably stressful time for leaving certificate students. There has been much uncertainty and a lack of clarity in recent months which has caused unnecessary confusion and stress. While many students were relieved last week when the Minister announced the cancellation of the examinations, others were disappointed and worried that the calculated grade system would not result in a fair reflection of all the work they have done this year and in previous years. I am deeply concerned that the proposed school standardisation alignment process that will use a school's past exam results to alter the results of current leaving certificate students will adversely affect students in disadvantaged schools who would otherwise have done well. There is now a perceived risk of such a student receiving a lower grade due to his or her school's previous results. How will the Minister ensure that this system is fair and recognises one of the most positive aspects of leaving certificate examinations, that is, that any student can excel no matter what school he or she attends? I doubt that the Minister would suggest that a student's score should be altered based on geography or socioeconomic background. However, with this system, what will effectively happen will be an almost stereotyping and pigeon-holing of schools in order to adhere to the results of previous years.

Has a decision been made about how far the data set used in these alignments will go back? How will the Minister offer a rock solid guarantee that the grading process will be carried out in a fair manner that does not inadvertently lead to further disadvantage for these students? Objectivity is another essential component of the calculated grade system. What steps have been taken to ensure that teachers and school principals are protected against being lobbied by parents and students as they work through this process?

It is also incredibly important that in this new exam process, students who do not fit into the standard mould of the leaving certificate are not forgotten about or excluded. How much consideration was given to home schoolers and students who have taught themselves subjects and, therefore, do not have teachers to give them a grade? In the case of repeat students who only have this year's in-class results to use as reference, will their previous leaving certificate results be taken into account? Was any consideration given to the leaving certificate applied exams going ahead? Given the way those students' courses and assessment are set up, they were only due to sit a small number of exams at the end of sixth year. Furthermore, how does

the Minister intend to guarantee that all grading and appeal processes will be completed ahead of the UCAS and EUNiCAS August deadline for students applying to universities abroad?

In his announcement last week, he stated that the original date of 29 July for the leaving certificate exams was now considered to be an unsafe return time based on updated information. If 29 July is not suitable for students to return to school, how will it be safe enough for schools to open just one month later in September? In fact, some secondary schools opened as early as 18 August last year. What consideration has been given to how students will safely return to school as currently planned, with schools to operate as normal? How can schools plan for the 2020-21 academic year given such uncertainty? How can they do their timetables and plan their induction days, training days, recruitment processes and interviews? Schools were only at the stage when the lockdown happened where retirements and career breaks had been flagged with principals. Surely those interviews have not even been held. How is it now proposed that they will be held? How will we have enough staff in our schools when they return?

I have received correspondence from parents of children with special needs expressing their concern over the lack of information being shared regarding their children's return to school and the loss of the July provision. It must remain a priority to get these children back in school as quickly as possible. What consideration has been given to the families in question and is there a roadmap in place for children with special needs to return to school? In addition, it is vital that we do not forget the invaluable work of our special needs assistants, SNAs. What engagement has the Minister had with them and how has he continued to keep them informed of where and how they fit into the Department's ever-changing plans?

I would be grateful if he might raise a matter with the Minister for Health. Regarding the human papillomavirus, HPV, school vaccine programme, many first year students across the country received their first dose of that vaccine last September and were due to receive the second dose from February onwards. What are the plans for schools whose students did not receive their second vaccine dose before the lockdown and has there been any communication with principals, teachers or parents on this matter? As it stands, my understanding is that parents are not allowed to take their child to a GP to receive the vaccine if the child is in the school programme. What are the implications for students who missed their second dose?

The impacts of the changes made in our education system in the next few months will echo for years to come. It is vitally important for all students, parents, teachers, educators and entire school communities that they receive clear, comprehensive and detailed information about these changes as quickly, effectively and fully as possible.



Deputy Joe McHugh

I will try to answer as many of the Deputy's questions as I can in the short time available to me. I will ensure she gets a formal response to any that are unanswered. I agree with her regarding the impact in terms of the primary school transition. I re-emphasise that we had a meeting this morning with our officials on that issue. We are getting a lot of correspondence from both parents and teachers and I will keep the House updated if there is any development in that regard.

The Deputy is correct about the stress on leaving certificate students. There was a lot of anxiety, confusion and speculation because of the environment in which we had a lot of

students preparing for a June exam. Within a short period of time following the lockdown, on 10 April, we announced that we would be postponing the exams.

There was a period of preparation as to what those exams would look like. A lot of students had their minds made up. Some Deputies in this House had their minds made up in that regard at a very early stage. However, there was also a preference among education stakeholders, myself included, and the majority of Deputies in the House that we should still try to find a way to hold written exams. When that became impossible, obviously there was still uncertainty. There has been a lot of uncertainty and speculation. I hope that we will work very thoroughly on the calculated grade model to ensure that certainty is provided that this is the right model.

The Deputy referred to standardisation. It is good to raise such issues because we want fairness and completeness, but as far as I am concerned from the meetings I have attended and the knowledge I have at this stage, it is quite clear that students in private schools, for example, will not be advantaged and community, DEIS and disadvantaged schools, to which the Deputy referred in particular, will not be disadvantaged. I remember meeting a teacher in Larkin community college in inner city Dublin last year who was doing a pathways in technology, P-TECH, programme and she talked about visible progression year to year, not in three or five-year bundles or ten-year timeframes. If there is progression year to year we have to record that and use the mathematical modelling to ensure that if any student is disadvantaged, which I do not think will happen, protection is in place. I thank the Deputy for raising the issue, but as far as I am concerned, school profiling will not be done in the way some have said.



Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin

I thank the Minister for his responses to others. He has already responded to many of the issues I wished to raise. I want him to publish the public health advice he has received in respect of cancelling the leaving certificate. I appreciate it was a difficult decision and I know it was not taken lightly. The Minister stated in his he got advice from NPHET which he has published, but I want to know if NPHET or Dr. Tony Holohan gave him advice to cancel the exams and if that was the basis on which he decided to cancel the exams. If that was the basis, if we cannot have 18 or 19 year old adults doing written exams in August, how can we expect infants to go to overcrowded primary schools in September? I again ask the Minister to publish the advice.

On the appeals process and the timeline of what will happen after this process has been completed, the ASTI has told its members that the marking itself cannot be appealed. Will the Minister, through his Department, please communicate directly with principals and set out exactly the timeline and appeals process? Apparently, students who are not happy with the assessed grades they receive have two options. First is to submit an appeal, which will not take into account the grade he or she got, and second is to sit the written exam whenever that might take place. Will the Minister confirm to the House that this is the case? If it is the case, will he please communicate directly with principals so that they know the exact timeline and process involved?

On school profiling, the Department's website states, "estimated marks from each school will be adjusted to bring them into line with the expected distribution for the school". I sometimes wonder if enough people in the House or society have any comprehension of what it is like to attend a DEIS school and the number of barriers between the pupils and their ability to

maximise their potential in this Republic. I sometimes wonder if people really know what it is like. This is probably the only opportunity in many instances for students to break out of poverty and disadvantage. The one opportunity they have is a written exam or an exam where the person marking the exam does not know who they are, where they are from or the school they attend.

The Minister has school league tables within his Department and it is not even possible to make a freedom of information, FOI, request for them because the Department knows they are unfair and give an unfair representation of the education system. Those tables are published in newspapers and every year, education spokespeople and Ministers come out and criticise them and they cannot be requested from the Department by FOI. Yet, this is the very profiling information that will be used to assess an individual's leaving certificate. How devastating must it be for students to grind through situations where they teach themselves honours mathematics, honours Irish or another higher level subject because it is not available in their schools? That is the determination some young people in this country have to break out of disadvantage and poverty. They knew that when the script was being marked, it would be anonymous. That is gone now, however, because the very profiling the Minister will not allow to be requested by FOI from his Department will be used to assess somebody's expected distribution from the school.

With the greatest of respect, I cannot accept the answer the Minister gave to other Deputies regarding school profiling. The Labour Party will accept the assessed grades system as proposed by the Minister. We appreciate there is no other option at this stage but we will not accept the school profiling. We cannot do that because it is fundamentally unfair. The simplest thing for the Minister to do now is to delete that from the process and to let each script and assessed grade stand on its own merits. I state that because I do not agree with the Minister when he states that an average student from a fee-paying school will not be advantaged by this system. If I was an average student from a fee-paying school, I would be much happier today than were I an exceptional student from a disadvantaged school. That is because students will be assessed by the history of their schools and, inevitably, someone from a fee-paying background or who has access to tutoring outside the school system will benefit from that. I ask the Minister to please just get rid of the school profiling aspect and then we can all move on together.

Regarding additional needs, and the issue of July provision has been raised by other Deputies, the Minister has said he is open to expanding it and I accept his statement. Turning to SNAs, however, there is still a level of confusion concerning them. I also refer to the level of disrespect they have received through this process, as has been mentioned elsewhere. The goodwill the SNAs have shown has not been replicated by the Department. It has been said to me many times that the Department understands dealing with school buildings and teachers but it does not know how to deal with things that are not school buildings or teachers. A direct communication from the Minister to SNAs, not via a trade union or the HSE, would be greatly appreciated.

My last point, and I will appreciate the Minister's response, is that leaving certificate applied students feel as if they are not involved in this conversation. When the Minister refers to the leaving certificate, will he please put it on record that he also refers to the leaving certificate applied? Otherwise, students taking that option feel they are being relegated in this conversation. For those students we hope and expect will be sitting a written exam in 2021, namely, fifth year students watching this entire situation with great uncertainty and upset, I ask the Minister to speak to them, their experience and what they can expect in 2021. They have missed out on a great deal of class time. What sort of mitigation will the Minister make for their school experience?



Deputy Joe McHugh

I want to try to stick to the issues raised by the Deputy. He raised the issue of whether I will publish the public health advice. To be clear, the public health advice meant that we could model what the leaving certificate would look like. Using the public health advice, therefore, we modelled the leaving certificate with one exam per day, papers taking one and half hours, staggered entry to exam halls on a day-to-day basis and exams going from 29 July into September. Using that advice and data, we modelled the leaving certificate and we brought that information to the partners around the table.

Obviously, it was brought to me as well. We decided, after getting advice from the State Examinations Commission, that it could not stand over the legality and validity of a leaving certificate that is not comparable to one of any other year. That is what informed us. The next step was to find out from public health advice whether, when we would announce the timetable the first week in June, there would be any change to the social distancing measures in July and August, and the answer was "No". We have that. That is the discussion we had. Deputy Ó Ríordáin also asked who gave the advice. We, in the Department of Education and Skills, including me, as Minister, made the decision based on the information we had that it would not be safe, it would not be right and, ultimately, it would not be fair.

The Deputy also tried to make the comparison between sitting an examination in August and bringing schools back in September. This was a decision about bringing post-primary school students, which I wanted and insisted on, in for two weeks prior to the examinations. We were talking about having students in the class for two weeks from mid-July.

The Deputy talked about appeals and guidelines. I stated earlier that in a week's time we will have that proper information to answer a range of possibly 200 questions that were raised today at our advisory meeting.

Deputy Ó Ríordáin is doing a disservice to disadvantaged schools. We have exceptional students in disadvantaged schools-----

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin

I know. I taught them.

Deputy Joe McHugh

-----and the Deputy is sending the message out today that they will be disadvantaged because they are in a disadvantaged school.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin

I am.

Deputy Joe McHugh

That is a disgrace.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin

It is not.

Deputy Joe McHugh

Deputy Ó Ríordáin had his time. The Deputy had eight minutes. I have 20 seconds left. It is a disgrace. I can assure the Deputy I will not get into a row with him. The Deputy can call me.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin

Do not point a finger at me then.

Deputy Joe McHugh

The Deputy can call me and I can sit down with him and talk about this.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin

Sorry, hold on. On a point of order-----

Deputy Joe McHugh

I will not allow-----

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin

-----there is no point in the Minister telling me he will not get into a row with me, pointing a finger at me and calling me a disgrace. I am calling the Minister's process, not the Minister, a disgrace.

Deputy Joe McHugh

There are leaving certificate students listening to that. It is wrong that the Deputy is peddling that because exceptional students, whether in a community school, a DEIS school or a private school, will not be discriminated against because it is an all-school mark. It is a grade. It is a---  
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Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin

Expected distribution.

Deputy Joe McHugh

It is a calculated grade coming from the school based on the performance.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart)

I call Deputy Gary Gannon of the Social Democrats.

Deputy Joe McHugh

I used the example of an incredible school in the city centre here, Larkin College, where I spoke to a teacher who talked about the progression within one year. That progression would be monitored. That progression will not disadvantage a student in any way.



Deputy Gary Gannon

I am conscious of the Minister's statement that exceptional students in disadvantaged schools will not be disadvantaged. Whereas students performing normally in fee-paying schools or

other schools will be grand, it is only the exceptional students in disadvantaged schools who will not be put out. That seems like an inherent disadvantage to me.

Something you learn when you grow up in a working-class house is that somehow poverty is your fault. You work hard in school. You work hard helping with your siblings and supporting family members who might be ill. You have to go off and get a second job while you are 16 so you can support the family income. No matter how hard you work, it will not be enough to shake off the limitations forced on you because of your family's wealth, or lack thereof. I am someone who grew up in the inner city, which the Minister referenced. I am somebody who has had the opportunity to go to university through an access programme and I have also been privileged to work in education for many years. I know full well that points are not a measurement of hard work, ability or potential. I know that in DEIS schools, not only the one the Minister referenced but those all over the country, a student getting 300 points is just as admirable as a student in another school who manages to get 600, taking circumstances into account. In DEIS schools and inner city schools, students who are smart, for example, children from the north inner city, are as clever as any privately-educated students who make up the vast majority of those in the third-level schools.

The leaving certificate is a game that many students cannot win. If you are a student from a low-income background, a student with a disability or a student from a migrant background, the odds are stacked against you. There are access routes into universities that are college-based initiatives available only to a small exceptional few, who will become myths to success to the many others who will fail.

The decision last week to award predictive grades or calculated grades codifies that in black and white. I am not sure what the difference between prediction and calculation is. I do not know of any calculation that has ever been made without an inherent prediction. These are based on the past performances of a school. It has been met with outrage among many equality activists. It has also been met with some degree relief on the part of students, who are just looking for clarity on the decision.

The perception of the leaving certificate as a great meritocracy persists. Every year that is enforced through feeder schools, which decide who gets the opportunity to go to which college and from what schools. That highlights the massive disadvantages inherent in our leaving certificate. There is one thing someone can do to increase his or her chances of going to university in this country. It is not to work hard, study or apply oneself; it is to go to a private school. Regardless of how hard someone studies, it will not make that vital difference if he or she is from a certain background. School progression rates in the same postcode can vary dramatically. Let us take Dublin 1 as an example, where there is a private school and several schools in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, programme. In the private school, 117% of students go on to third level each year, accounting for those who take a gap year. In the DEIS schools, one which I have referenced, only 34% of students do so. That is not a reflection of the students. Talking about that honestly and clearly is not discrimination. It is not an insult to those students. It just highlights the fact that there is an ingrained disadvantage in there. Failing to talk about it is actually an insult to those students. The leaving certificate debacle has failed so many students this year, in what is widely acknowledged as one of the most worrying times in a young adult's life. The delays in making decisions, and indeed the decision that was ultimately made, have contributed to what is already an anxious time. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that this year's decision has merely ensured that an embedded economic inequality remains embedded. Our education system has failed students for decades. Every year, students doing the leaving certificate are failed because of an illness, because they are experiencing grief or because of the pressure. This year it is simply failing everybody. It will continue to do so unless we systematically dismantle the inequalities enshrined within it.

Like everywhere else, diversity in our third level institutions is crucial. We need more working-class third level students, more Traveller students, more students from Roma backgrounds, more ethnic students and more students with disabilities. As things stand, the State has totally abdicated its responsibility to ensure equal access to universities.

Universities themselves have attempted to diversify their entrant intake through schemes such as college access programmes. These access students are success stories. Study after study shows that when the barriers are removed, the playing field is more equal. These students' grades in college are remarkably similar to those of students who have entered through more traditional routes. These programmes are vital to diversifying our third level institutions and ensuring greater progression rates in marginalised communities. However, the fact that the diversification of third level falls to universities and colleges alone is unacceptable. It is not acceptable that in some universities only 10% of places or fewer are reserved for those from marginalised backgrounds, those whom our State has failed. It is not acceptable that these access programmes, which perform an essential function in diversifying our universities, are reliant on fundraising and donations from private individuals. The State is utterly failing students from disadvantaged areas and schools in areas of economic deprivation, while simultaneously cruelly maintaining that this is a system based on merit or that the exceptional student will progress.

Let us not forget that an industry has been built up to profit off this unequal system. Every year, grind schools, private tuition and fee-paying schools transform education into an arms race. The more money a student's parents have, the more likely he or she is to go to university. The more parents invest in their sons, the more opportunity they have in comparison with somebody else in a disadvantaged community.

More than half of the top 20 schools sending the highest proportion of students to third level were fee-paying schools, according to the feeder list of 2019.

The outrage that a student's grade will be decided as much based on past performance of his or her school as much as on his or her own ability is one that we must keep with us, grow and build upon. We have failed decades of students through this system of educational apartheid. In the Thirty-third Dáil, we need to be able to say, "No more". Our education system is crying out for reform, with mass support from educators, parents and, critically, from students themselves. It must be our priority. The State must step up and ensure that a postcode is no longer the most reliable predictor of third level access.

The leaving certificate subjects all students to sitting through unnecessary stress and pressure and, perhaps most dangerously, teaches the winners and losers of this system that their individual outcomes are due to their hard work or lack thereof rather than myriad complex inequalities exacerbated by a system that has run since 1925 without much innovation or change. The system thrives on the fact that each year, a couple of exceptional students will break through the barriers that we have constructed. We use these exceptional kids to lie to ourselves and say that the system works, and that if only all other kids were like these exceptional few kids, they too would be able to progress. It allows us to pretend that the system is not broken and that somehow the kids who are not exceptional are. Let us think of what that does to the student who succeeds in what is, in reality, a lottery, what it does to the students who came close but always feel that they let themselves and their families down, and what it does to the couple of students every year who understand this in their bones, the 11 and 12 year olds who know that is an unfair system, but know that there is no point in trying, because while they are good, they may not be what we consider to be acceptable.

I have one question for the Minister. We have an opportunity this year to be more collective in our response. The leaving certificate is constructed in such a way that when one unravels one string, the whole thing falls apart. We need a cross-party committee to decide on not just the next stages of education and what it looks like in September, October and November. The

Minister has referred several times to the experts who are leading this process. Why can these stakeholders not be in that room? Why can we not have a committee that looks at education for fifth year pupils going into sixth year and sixth class pupils going into first year in September, and let us all be involved in that process, because we all have to carry the news?



Deputy Joe McHugh

If we get a new Government formed any time soon, there will be an education committee. The standardised system that we will look to bring in has not been finalised because we are going through the consultation, but it will be there shortly. The leaving certificate system is going into its 95th year. I know the Deputy spent most of his speech talking about its merits and demerits.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart)

I cannot deviate from the Order of Business that was approved earlier. Deputy Gannon used up the bulk of his time.

Deputy Joe McHugh

Give me ten seconds.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart)

The Minister will get ten seconds.

Deputy Joe McHugh

No matter what school they are in, every single student will be measured on their performance over two years. The teachers and the whole school community will have that evidence from the two years. That is what we are working on. I take on the Deputy's concerns.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart)

That is the Minister's ten seconds.

Deputy Joe McHugh

I thank Deputy Gannon. He has been very constructively in this process. He highlighted the digital inequities. I know other people did, but the Deputy kept in touch with me and raised it. I thank him for that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart)

I call Deputy Gino Kenny.



Deputy Gino Kenny

I am sharing time with Deputy Mick Barry.

I have two questions. The vast majority of teachers and parents welcome the clarification on the leaving certificate. When the Minister spoke here two weeks ago, it was clear that it was not logistically possible to do the leaving certificate. The big issue for teachers is that they will now judge their own pupils for State exams. They want to be advocates for their students rather than stand in judgment. There is obviously unease about predictive grading in the teaching profession. There is also the dynamic regarding lobbying by students, which is quite unethical. The predictive grades model is discriminatory and will compound educational disadvantage in Ireland. Will the Minister consider having the State Examinations Commission and the Department of Education and Skills assess and do the grading rather than teachers?



Deputy Joe McHugh

I hope I understood the question correctly. To be clear, the State Examinations Commission will have nothing to do with this process. Our legal advice states it cannot have anything to do with it, so that is the reason we are setting up the new group.

There are two major stages; the first of which is the school-based stage involving teachers and their teaching colleagues. For example, there may be two or three geography teachers in a school. If there is one art teacher, for example, that teacher must link in with the deputy principal and the principal then has a role. There is an all-school evaluation in determining the calculated grades and then that goes to the Department of Education and Skills. They are the steps and that is the way the process will work. I think that answers the Deputy's question. I thank Deputy Gino Kenny. He and a few of his colleagues were very clear in the previous debate here that they wanted the exam cancelled. I will come to Deputy Barry in a moment as he had ten points.



Deputy Gino Kenny

My second question is about students with special educational needs in DEIS schools. They have more than likely been experiencing difficulties, especially engaging in remote learning in the past two months. Does the Department have plans to ameliorate the loss of teaching time for these students and to increase the number of special education teachers and SNAs in September or October of the next academic year?



Deputy Joe McHugh

The answer is "Yes". We have a continuity-of-learning section set up in the Department and we have been working on those issues for a number of weeks. We are looking now at continuity not just for this term but as some Members stated, for the transition for fifth-year

students, and seeing where there are gaps for young people with disadvantage as well. We have a specific section working on that.



Deputy Mick Barry

I want to make some points about the position facing the leaving certificate students of 2021, the current fifth-year students, but first I want to look at the reason the leaving certificate exams were cancelled. No doubt the official record will show that they were cancelled due to logistical problems related to organising State exams in a pandemic, the need for PPE in the exam halls, the need for social distancing in the exam halls, and the need to recruit a greater number of volunteers etc. I do not doubt for one moment that these and other logistical problems were very significant factors in the decision. However, I do wish to challenge the idea that they were the only or overwhelming factors that contributed to the cancellation. Many people, including parents, teachers and students alike, felt it was wrong to proceed with State exams when the pandemic and the loss of school time arising from it placed such a heavy strain on the mental health of so many young people. Those people exerted pressure on the Department in many different ways, but special mention must go to the students themselves. They spoke out online. They organised a poll of nearly 25,000 students, showing 80% support for cancellation, and they attended online protest meetings in their thousands, a number that was only going to grow without a change in the Government position. For this reason I want to read into the record of the Dáil that the leaving certificate class of 2020 played an important role in securing the cancellation of exams that threatened the mental health of their peers. I, for one, would like to congratulate them on having taken this stand and for having achieved this end.

The new arrangements the Minister has put in place are not satisfactory. Students who were preparing to sit leaving certificate papers outside of a school setting have been left high and dry and that is an issue the Minister must address. I ask him to comment on that in his reply to me.

In particular, I wish to raise an issue that in some way is within the theme of this debate, namely, discrimination against working-class students who go to school in working-class communities, which it seems to me is built into this alternative plan. The plan is very similar to the predictive grade system that pertains in the UK under a Tory Government. The biggest research study in the world on this system, conducted by Dr. Gill Wyness - I hope I pronounced the name correctly - of University College London, shows that applicants from low-income homes are more likely to have their grades underpredicted.

School profiling, which would see a student's grade being marked up or down in line with the past exam history of his or her school or the collective grades in that school, would discriminate in particular against students in schools based in working-class communities.

School profiling of this kind should not, and must not, be part of the 2020 leaving certificate.

I ask the Minister for further comment on that in his reply. Students should not be pitted against each other in a battle for scarce third level places in this pandemic year. Instead, the Government should open up third level by increasing investment in courses and apprenticeships and offering places for all who want one. In fact, I would argue that third level entry should operate in this way from here on in. This would allow for the abolition of the stressful and outdated leaving certificate exams, which should be deleted from the education system.

As I indicated earlier, I want to talk about the other leaving certificate students: the fifth years who make up the class of 2021. The leaving certificate is a two-year cycle which normally runs over 18 months of classroom time in our schools. The class of 2021, however, will lose the best part of three of those 18 months. Even if the schools open in September, this will represent a very significant portion of the course, especially given that the majority of the course is covered in fifth year. Students who are due to take oral exams next year have already been away from a school setting in which they could practice their oral skills for two months. It is little wonder that stress levels seem to be rising among fifth years. The Minister's Department now needs to consider making changes which would make due allowance for the handicaps under which these students have been placed. I intend to return to this subject in the weeks ahead. Will the Minister comment on whether he is considering making allowances-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart)

He is not going to have much time.

Deputy Mick Barry

-----for these students in addition to answering my question on school profiling?



Deputy Joe McHugh

The Deputy asked why the exams were cancelled. They were not cancelled; they were postponed to a date on which it will be safe to do them. We are pursuing the calculated grades system. The Deputy is correct in saying that it was not only public health advice that informed what the leaving certificate would look like. The student voice was quite instrumental and very significant. I engaged with 16,000 to 17,000 students on Instagram one evening. This very loud voice was certainly a big factor. Mental health was a big issue. I had written advice from our National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, about the anxiety and pressure this was causing for young people and we considered disadvantage and digital inequity. There were a number of cumulative reasons we arrived at this decision. I say again that in a week's time, we will have guidelines on how the calculated grades model will work. The emphasis in those guidelines will be on ensuring students' performance over two years, irrespective of their school environment, is taken into account. With regard to those taking classes outside the school, we will have to have tutors assess their performance over two years. These grades will involve the professional judgment of the teacher and the whole school community. The principal and teaching colleagues will be involved and the vice-principal may be involved. I do not have all the answers. We have operated this system for 94 years and we are going into the 95th year. We are introducing a new system in a matter of weeks. We are all going to need help and guidance. From day one, I have insisted on nobody being disadvantaged as a result of where he or she is from or the school he or she attends. This system involves a performance indicator decided by the school and the all-school grade over a period of two years.

Deputy Mick Barry

Will the Minister answer my question on fifth years?

Deputy Joe McHugh

We are working on the issue of fifth years.



Deputy Peadar Tóibín

I start by paying tribute to and thanking teachers around the country. Covid-19 has been an eye-opener for many families with regard to the work, skill, dedication and patience involved in educating young children.

The gratitude that has been displayed by the political class should not be forgotten about when this crisis subsides. I mention that in the context of equal pay for teachers and contracts of indefinite duration, CID, for teachers that need to be addressed, and I hope he will address them.

I say to students that the leaving certificate is an important exam that has an effect on their next step in their education and career. However, it is by no means the be-all and end-all with regard to their progress through life, education and work. There are many hundreds of different avenues to success in their lives, through education and their careers, ahead of them that can still be taken no matter what happens in these particular exams.

Obviously, the Minister has not had an easy time and it has been difficult for the Government. The speed of this virus going through the planet and the unknown nature of the virus have made decisions very difficult. He has only had a few months to get to grips with this. However, one of my major problems is that the display by the Government so far with regard to the leaving certificate has been a masterclass in indecision. It is a stressful time anyway and that indecision, speculation, and chopping and changing of positions and decisions have only heaped the pressure and stress on students over the last two months. The plan outlined by the Government so far has many problems. It is significant that the exams will not now be held until November meaning that the results will not be available until the new year. Consequently, it is unlikely that those who choose to sit the exams will be able to make it into university this year. Those who sit the exam will, therefore, have to take a year out of education. They may have to try to get a job or if not have a year without income. They will have to watch their classmates and their friends move on with the rest of their lives. That is a major cost to many young men and women in the country. It is a cost that people will not be willing to risk.

Originally the Minister said he had planned for the exams to be scheduled in late July and early August. I am asking for a definitive timeline for the leaving certificate. When will the results of the predicted marks be announced? When will the appeals process happen? When will the CAO offers be made? What effect, if any, will it have on the start of the new university year? Given the small numbers involved and the massive number of classes around the country, will the Minister commit to scheduling the exams to enable students to make it to their college courses later this year?

There is also significant concern over the pressures being brought to bear on teachers. Since the Minister's announcement of the predictive marks, anecdotally I have heard there has been an increase in communication by students and parents with teachers, many of them rich with compliments at the moment. I know of one teacher who received half a dozen emails from one family just before lunchtime and another parent who contacted a teacher telling the teacher exactly what points the student needed for their desired college course. Another student with low outputs since 7 May has become the most prolific in the class in their level of output.

A balance needs to be brought to bear to protect teachers from undue pressure and influence. We also need to ensure that students are not isolated from supports and communications from those teachers in their time of need.

I would like the Minister to address this key question today. Will teachers, principals and schools be indemnified against legal action? Can we at least give them the confidence that no matter what pressures they experience, they will not have to deal with that issue?

If we are to protect teachers and help students, we need to ensure the system is as fair and transparent as possible. Some students have completed project work and others have not. Woodwork and engineering work are at varying stages of completion.

Some students have gone on field trips and started projects while others have not. Will students be allowed to work on such projects in the coming weeks? Teachers will be marking complete projects, partly completed projects and even non-existent projects. They do not have a marking scheme to help them to do so. How will they undertake the marking? Will teachers be responsible for it or will independent markers be brought in? Some sections of the home economics course have already been corrected by the State Examinations Commission but it is proposed that the work will be returned to class teachers who will have to remark it. Why is that the case? It does not make sense that work which has already been corrected will be returned to teachers for re-correction.

In order to simplify the process, I suggest that teachers be allowed to take an average of three of students' results in fifth-year Christmas exams, fifth-year summer exams, sixth-year Christmas exams and the mock leaving certificate. Those data are already in schools' systems. It is fair and transparent and, as such, will also protect teachers.

I wish to add my voice on the issue of school profiling. To what extent will the profile of a school impact on marking? Will it correct or change the result by 10% or 15%? What is the element of a school's history that will form part of students' results? Profiling places people into boxes; that is what it is for. Education should be about students breaking out of their boxes. It is clear that in many aspects of life, profiling is a form of discrimination. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that we do not have such discrimination in this area?



Deputy Joe McHugh

As the Deputy is aware, the issue of equal pay for teachers was the subject of significant conversations prior to the election and the pandemic. Anything relating to the issue will form part of the next pay talks.

The Deputy referred to indecision. To explain, once we postponed the exams to 29 July, I instructed my officials to look at the calculated grades model. I had reservations about the model and went public in that regard. However, once I started informing myself through that process and seeing how the checks and balances come into the system, I became convinced that it would be fairer for students - and safer for them from a public health point of view - to go for that model rather than holding a poorly run leaving certificate examination. That process took a certain amount of time for two reasons. The first is that we had to get legal advice. If we had not done, the State Examinations Commission would be running that calculated grades model but it does not have the authority to do so. Although the Education Act 1998 delegates it the power to run and correct exams, it no longer has that power. Legislative change would be required to give it that power. All Deputies are aware why that cannot be done. That is why I had to get Cabinet approval to get executive authority to set up a new group within the Department. The second factor was consultation. We needed to reach

out to teachers. I did not want teachers to be bounced into a decision announced on radio, television or Twitter that we would be going for the calculated grades model. They were part of that process and that engagement was very important.

On the definitive timeline, we will continue to work with stakeholders. We will have strict, specific and clear advice and guidelines for teachers regarding marking and professional boundaries between parents, students and teachers. That work has begun already and we will be in a position to publish it next week.

As to when the exam results will come out, I am on record as stating that I wish for them to come out as close to the traditional date as possible. However, we must bear in mind that teachers have not begun to assess grades because they are awaiting the guidelines.

We need to continue to work through this. A few Deputies have raised it. Each school - not the Department of Education and Skills - will be determining the result for each class and each individual student.



Deputy Danny Healy-Rae

I appreciate that the Minister has a very difficult job. If I was a betting man he might be praying that he would get some other post in the present transactions on the programme for Government. So many of the children wanted the calculated grades assessment that I am glad they have got it but there are other pupils and students who felt they would do better if they sat the leaving certificate. I would have thought that as the numbers sitting it would then be reduced the Department would be able to cater for them to sit the exam. The Minister is saying that may happen some time later in the year but a year is then gone out of their lives and we have lost something there.

How does the Minister propose to cater for mature students who were hoping to sit the exams or students who want to increase their marks in a subject that they needed for a specific course they were hoping to take? In line with many other Deputies, I have serious concerns about the July provision for children with Down syndrome and the inclusion of other children in that category because the parents of these children are really suffering and going through a lot at present. I am hoping that project will be offered and available to those children and parents.

Every year parents' income for the previous year, or the year before that, is assessed for the SUSI grant. Surely this year's income will be assessed when students and parents apply now for the grant. I hope that is the way they will be assessed this year, not on last year's income or that of the year before because incomes are way down.

That is another problem caused by holding the exam later in the year. The students will be applying next year for college and the points will be raised. The 2021 class will be affected by more pupils presenting next year. We need to talk about starting back to school in September and to consider how children with underlying conditions such as asthma and respiratory problems and teachers will be facilitated. We have to engage with Bus Éireann for bringing children to school in the new year because if social distancing is still the order of the day there will have to be more buses and much more thought put into this. There is a lot of work to be done. I know the Minister has less than a minute to reply but if he does not answer everything I have said he may send on the reply please.



Deputy Michael Healy-Rae

I have five minutes and I want to share that with the Minister so that he can answer my questions properly. I thank the Minister for providing much clarity around the leaving certificate of 2020 last Friday.

Many students are pleased with the plan while many others are not but clarification is still needed around some aspects of the announcement. This includes where a student is taking a subject outside school. My office has been contacted by many students who say their principals believe it is not possible to engage with outside people as they would not be able to verify the data. What will be done in these cases? For example, many students take music outside school. The person taking them for music may not be a teacher. How will these students be facilitated?

Is it fair that students who wish to take exams will have to wait until 2021 to attend their first year of college, or is that correct?

What contact has the Minister had with his EU counterparts on international students? It is expected that the numbers of international students will be low, which will result in additional places in our colleges being available to domestic students.

I refer to students who are going into their leaving certificate year in the forthcoming academic year. There has been little reference to the time they have lost in the run-up to their final year. Much of the work for leaving certificate takes place in fifth year, including project work. What plans are being put in place to assist these students? Will they be given additional time around deadlines next year?

The July provision for children with special needs will have to be dealt with sensitively and carefully by the Minister and his officials. Regardless of whether the incoming Minister for Education and Skills is Deputy McHugh or someone else, this matter will have to be given the thought, kindness, care and consideration needed to help children with special needs, their parents and the people who work with them. They must be considered at this difficult time.



Deputy Joe McHugh

I thank both Deputies. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae asked about mature students. They will be treated in the same manner as every other student in terms of data, regardless of whether they are outside school. Deputy Michael Healy-Rae gave the example of music tuition. If someone is getting tuition outside the school setting, data and information from the tutor will be critical in assessing that student. There will be other more difficult examples where students at home do not have access to tutors or are not using tutors. We will look at those on a case-by-case basis. It is an issue which has arisen. The Deputy gave the specific example of music. If a student is studying music in a music school or with a music tutor, the tutor will have access to the performance of the student over two years.

Both Deputies raised children with Down's syndrome and July provision. I completely agree that it is a very important service for many young people and parents. We are working on that and if we can expand on it in any way, I am keen that we do so.

The matter of SUSI grant assessment being made on 2019 income was raised. The change of circumstances in 2020 would have to be brought into consideration as well. The matter of points for next year and points changing was raised. If a student who decides to take the exam at the earliest opportunity - I have spoken ambitiously about the Halloween break at the end of the first term, but it could be November or December - gets a place in his or her second or third preference area in September and then repeats the year, I have insisted that this will not result in their losing out on the SUSI grant or free fees. We do not know when the exam will take place. It could be January.

The Deputy is correct in saying that we face massive work in going back to school. We are engaging with Bus Éireann and private operators to make that happen.

International students may not be here in September and we will have extra capacity in the system. The third level institutions and their leaders are very flexible and they will work with us to see if we can have more capacity.

The Deputy also asked about the fifth-year students. It is a critical area because they are doing their leaving certificate. Since 12 March they have lost out in terms of time so we are looking at contingency to see how we can support those fifth-year students. That is very important.

[Acting Chairman \(Deputy John Lahart\)](#)

For the Independent Group the first speaker is Deputy Connolly.



[Deputy Catherine Connolly](#)

I will use my five minutes by way of a question-and-answer session. I thank the Minister for his work. I do not believe it was easy to come to this decision. I would have been of a different view. I believe the leaving certificate should have been abandoned this year - I agree with that part - but opened up for third level and apprenticeships but that is my personal view. I say "well done" to the Minister. At least we have certainty now.

Regarding the July provision, is it going ahead or is it not? I welcome the fact that the Minister is trying to expand it. Is it going ahead? If the Minister does not know now, when will he know?

[Deputy Joe McHugh](#)

The answer to the question is "Yes"; it is going ahead. We are working through it so we will have more information on that shortly-----

[Deputy Catherine Connolly](#)

Very good.

[Deputy Joe McHugh](#)

-----but it is going ahead.

[Deputy Catherine Connolly](#)

I welcome that. Other Deputies have mentioned practical subjects, some of which already have taken place and the results are available. How will the practical subjects such as science, art, woodwork and so on be taken into account?

Deputy Joe McHugh

As for what will happen in that regard, the teacher has the information, data and knowledge of the student and so will be looking to make an assessment. I will not pre-empt the decisions as to how that will happen because that will form part of the guidelines that will come out next week.

Deputy Catherine Connolly

The projects will be taken into account and the teachers will be doing the assessment.

Deputy Joe McHugh

It has yet to be decided how that will happen but the project work, whether it is research or practical work, will be assessed by the teacher.

Deputy Catherine Connolly

Regarding external students, the Minister has clarified that the tutors will be giving their assessment but for those students, particularly mature students, who do it themselves, the Minister has not worked out yet what is going on. Is that right?

Deputy Joe McHugh

We will be looking at those on a case-by-case basis.



Deputy Catherine Connolly

Regarding students with dyslexia, will the tutors' opinion and assessment be taken into account? Tied in with that, I want to ask about special needs, which I have mentioned repeatedly in the past two weeks and will repeat again now. We have all received the letters. I have raised them with the Taoiseach. They have written to the Taoiseach directly. I agree with them. For approximately four or five months there has been a setting aside of education for people with special needs in particular, without any rationale. That is my concern. I understand the position on public health is changing on a daily basis but in the case of children with special needs who are attending special schools, was consideration ever given, and can it be given, to opening up the special schools prior to any other schools?

Deputy Joe McHugh

Nobody wants students back in the classroom more than me. One of the things we found out in the time since 12 March is that while online platforms work and are helpful, we are missing-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly

I am sorry but my question was specific. Will consideration be given to opening up special schools as a distinct entity?

Deputy Joe McHugh

That will be subject to public health guidelines and, at the moment, the public health guidelines are that schools open in September.



Deputy Catherine Connolly

On that, I have to say I am unhappy because I do not see any voice at the top level committee in regard to that vulnerable group of people. I do not even like the word "vulnerable". We should treat them with equality, dignity and respect. That group requires routine, structure and so on. I do not have the time to read out all of that; the Minister is fully familiar with it, and I respect him on that. What voice is there for those children to look at their needs based, of course, on public health? Who is doing that? It seems to me that nobody is doing that and that they just have been forgotten.



Deputy Joe McHugh

I do not agree with that assessment because there are many advocacy groups that work on behalf of these students. They have been very active and engaged with our Department. In fact, last week, when I met the children's ombudsman, he raised the issues of disadvantage, digital inequity and special needs. A lot of work is going on in that regard and we have a group in the Department looking at that specific area. We have guidelines out now as to how we can assist in that regard. The schools first closed for two weeks and that continued after Easter and we were working within a two to three-week period but with schools closed now until September, we have started the work around how we can further support people with special needs.



Deputy Catherine Connolly

I appeal to the Minister to look at this distinct group and re-assess the effect of the decisions being made on their lives and the lives of their families.  
My final question, for my last 14 seconds, relates to UL. What progress has been made on the return of rent on a *pro rata* basis?



Deputy Joe McHugh

That issue was raised in the Dáil previously, and as I told the Deputy at that time, the Secretary General was engaging with the president of UL on it. Following that Dáil sitting, I contacted the chancellor and I know a meeting occurred. There has been no outcome, but the issue of paying back students was on the agenda, and as far as I know, the college has not made a decision on it as of yet.



Deputy Michael McNamara

I am sharing time with Deputy Harkin.

I commend the Minister on his work with UL. Would he recommend that the rent regime in other private institutions that are refusing to return rent be changed prospectively? Obviously we cannot change things retrospectively but we can make sure that this does not happen again and that students are not taken advantage of in the way they have been.

I wish to return to the issue raised by Deputies Gannon and Ó Ríordáin. I accept that the Minister is in a very difficult situation and that class rankings will be done as fairly as possible. However, the guidance published on the Government's website simply states: "The teachers' estimated marks from each school will be adjusted to bring them into line with the expected distribution for the school." State schools in my constituency, no more than those in the Minister's, do not routinely end up in the top ten schools feeding universities. Those schools are predominantly fee-paying ones. I appreciate that he is in a difficult position but how will this not continue to perpetrate an inequality? Equality is the cornerstone and foundation of this Republic. I ask him to look at this matter and abandon official advice if necessary. Bright students in every school have to be given their chance, notwithstanding where we find ourselves as a country.

I welcome the clarification on July provision for children with special needs, to the extent that the Minister has been able to give it up to now.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart)

I call Deputy Harkin.



Deputy Joe McHugh

I would like to respond to Deputy McNamara first, as this is important. I appreciate his intervention. The reason we need standardisation is that we cannot have a school in Bantry on a different platform from a school in Letterkenny. That is why we have it. There is an assumption that once this standardised model comes into place, maths scores, for example, within a school will be brought down. However, it is possible that maths could be brought up instead. It is not a question of teachers' marks for subjects being brought down by this standardisation. The standardisation is necessary because we have to look at all the other CAO applicants on last year's leaving certificate. That is why there has to be standardisation and a level playing field. We cannot have a case where a score in Bantry is different from a score in Letterkenny. I understand the concern around ensuring that everybody is treated fairly, and that was the subject of today's advisory group meeting with the students' union representative voice. I will certainly continue to feed in the concerns expressed in this House today, but I reiterate that this is based on the school-based assessment and the track records of students over a period of two years. Students will be marked by the teaching group and the all-school group once they provide the evidence. They will have the data and exam scripts, whether from Christmas exams, different exams or from speaking to teachers who do an

exam after every module. There is a track record and a safety net for students who may have moved to that school. The junior cycle result will also be built into the mathematical model.

Deputy Marian Harkin

Just like in the European Parliament, I have one minute.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart)

That time includes a response from the Minister.



Deputy Marian Harkin

First, I commend the Minister on his work with UL and ask him please to keep up the pressure. Second, I am delighted to hear about July provision because it is an absolute lifeline. The Minister should contact parents about that as soon as he can. Not all parents want it, but many do.

I have just one question. When schools go back in September, space will be an issue. Has the Minister any plans about renting suitable local space? Organisations such as community groups, voluntary groups or language schools might have local halls or centres available. Does the Minister have any plans to do that? I know of one or two excellent ones in his own native county of Donegal.



Deputy Joe McHugh

It is too early to speculate as to what it would look like but to reassure the House, the primary forum met this morning. It is very anxious to get this right. We will be working within public health advice and guidance but one thing is certain. We need to get students back in the classroom but at the heart of that is ensuring they will be safe.