



**NATIONAL PARENTS COUNCIL
Post Primary**

COMHAIRLE NAISIUNTA TUISMITHEOIRI
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NPCPP – Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 on 2nd July 2020.

Committee members,

The National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP) is grateful to the Special Committee on COVID-19 Response for the opportunity to make these submissions on behalf of parents of students attending post-primary schools in Ireland and their children.

The mental and physical wellbeing of our children has always been the main focus of concern for parents. That continues to be the case alongside fairness, equality and equity in the delivery of the support that our children deserve having been faced with the consequences of this dreadful COVID-19 disease.

We have advocated, from the start of this pandemic, that all partners to the education of our nations youth must work together to ensure that pupils and students are not negatively affected by the restrictions imposed due to this virus.

Decisions made by educators and all stakeholders involved in the care and education of our students must continue to hold these requirements as central to the considerations and discussions that inform them.

We have seen very substantial support for individuals, companies and businesses to assist them through COVID. It is recognised and discussed widely that this pandemic will have long lasting affects and that it is likely to take a number of years for our nation to recover economically.

These measures are considered absolutely essential to get Ireland working again. It is appropriate that such investment and support is put in place in the face of this unprecedented crisis.

Flexibility and new ways of working and thinking is demanded from and is being implemented by all concerned.

The same commitment, in terms of new creative thinking, support for pupils and schools – both in and outside the classroom - and the financial investment required must also be now demonstrated to support or children and students.

Directors: M. Fanning **President**, N. Keenan **Vice President**, M. O'Shea **Chair of Finance**, P. Rolston **Communications Director**, N. Bannister, R. Hemeryck, M. Martin, R. Matthews, N. Mishra, S. O'Riordan, F. Walshe. **Company Secretary:** M. Mulry,

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Similar flexibility and new thinking will be required to ensure that our nation's children are offered the education and support they need to ensure that they have opportunity for a fair and equitable pathway through their education and into their future lives.

NPCPP is particularly aware of the additional difficulties and challenges experienced by many students who suffer disadvantage due to their geographical location, their background or family circumstances, those who require additional learning support and those with special needs.

These students are often the most vulnerable in society and NPCPP strongly believe that it is the absolute duty of all charged with their education and learning to ensure that they receive the supports and have available to them the opportunities they deserve.

The COVID-19 restrictions and changes will, in many cases, have had a far worse affect on these children, their education and their progress.

We strenuously advocate that special consideration is given to these students as required. They, in particular, with their parents, need to be assured of the fairness and support they deserve in their pursuit of their goals and opportunities to reach their full potential.

NPCPP wish to emphasise the importance that we and all parents attach to seeing our students return to normality in education as soon as is safely possible.

This will require all stakeholders to continue to accept that unusual consequences and circumstances remain. Flexibility, understanding and a willingness to work together, with mutual respect and support, will be required by everyone as we progress.

This pandemic has caused huge stress to our young population and some may be traumatised by the event so each school should have capacity to link with a psychologist or therapist to deal with these issues. We must not make our children afraid of going to school. We must support them through the journey 'back to normality'.

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Transition years – ie. Pupils and students moving from Primary to Secondary, Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle will require and warrant particular attention.

All students have already lost over 3 months classroom and school time in 2020 and much will need to be done to get these students ‘back up to speed’.

There is particular concern around those now entering Form 6 and Form 3 – state exam years.

Schools closed towards the end of the Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle courses for 2020 state exam students. Many would have substantially completed their curriculums and courses.

Those facing state exams in 2021 have lost crucial mid-stream classroom learning and interaction time. This will potentially have an even greater stressful effect than closure had on 2020 exam students with disruption mid-cycle. This must be taken into account when looking towards assessment and 2021 state examinations.

In previous submissions and statements, to a number of educational stakeholders and within a number of consultation forums, NPCPP has emphatically supported a change in the structures and processes around the Junior and Senior Cycles and seeking adjustment to practices and examination methods used to date within the education system in Ireland.

COVID-19 restrictions have led us, by default, to a point where alternative final assessment methods have had to be explored and weaknesses in IT and Broadband access, to facilitate on-line study have been identified.

The learnings and opportunities presented by these enforced changes should be utilised fully to assist towards adjusted method of learning and final assessment that can fairly and properly reflect the talents, achievements and abilities of each student.

COVID is likely to linger for a long time. Suggested timescales of 12 to 18 months to discover, test and have confidence in a vaccine indicate that this pandemic could disrupt ‘normal’ schooling for 2 years and possibly more.

One of the biggest problems and causes of stress and frustration was the last minute decisions and changes which resulted from rapidly changing and unknown timescales ‘in the eye’ of a developing pandemic which arrived with little warning.

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We know about this pandemic now. We are beginning to function with this virus as a part of everyday life. We are aware of many of the difficulties it brings with it.

With the knowledge and experience we have gained to date we know that coping with our 'new way of life' will require change and planning.

We now have time to plan properly and cohesively. We must do that.

No students or families should again face the distress, inadequate facilities or access to support that our students faced in 2020 due to the sudden emergence of this disease.

Options must be properly thought through and presented in the early stages of the next two academic years at least, so that students, parents and all involved in education know well in advance what procedures and processes will be implemented in the possible scenarios we face.

No 'last minute' switching and changing,. We have seen the distress that such actions can cause.

We know now what may be in store. We now have the benefit of some experience and know that we have the ability to offer and deliver alternatives and options when necessary.

We must plan early and issue timely communication indicating the procedures and processes to be implemented to meet a number of possible scenarios. Doing so will ensure smooth transition and minimal stress for our students, teachers and families.

There is opportunity, and maybe necessity, to change the learning or study model as we move into the next academic year and the future, but school, college and the related social and community benefits to our students is as crucial to learning and development of our students as the academic study aspects of schooling are.

While blended learning is likely to have to be considered, and may bring with it some positive benefits, the school community is at the core of each child's learning experience and the importance of participation and interaction in that environment should never be underestimated.

Getting back to school as safely possible is vital to the health and well-being of all students and to the benefit of our communities and society.

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NPCPP appreciate that re-opening our schools will present some considerable difficulties. The pandemic has demonstrated how state, school and home must be able to work in tandem to support our children's learning.

While the requirement for IT facility, broadband access and the necessary ability for all students to combine study at school and at home has been clearly identified to meet COVID-19 restrictions to date we must progress back to 'normal schooling' as quickly as is safely possible.

The overall affect of COVID-19 on student education is unprecedented and all stakeholders must strive to bring a sense of normality back to our children's schooling and learning as soon as is safely possible.

The health and mental well-being of the nation's children must be our first consideration. The very real needs for our young people to socialise and interact – safely – with their peers must be recognised and drive our efforts towards the earliest re-opening our schools feasible within the health and medical advices from NPHE.

Partners in education must now work together in true partnership to ensure that our students do not suffer further. That will likely require many of us to step outside our comfort zones and face the fact that, for some time to come there may be some calculated and considered risks which need to be taken in our efforts to effectively take care of the nations children and students.

Invariably there will be additional costs attached to getting our children back to school and education while the pandemic still looms large over all aspects of life.

There must be a commitment, by the state, to meet those costs.

Returning to as near a normal school calendar as soon as possible will be challenging.

Working together, with mutual respect and support, we can meet and overcome this challenge as we have done those we have faced to date.

NPCPP assure the Special Committee on COVID-19 Response and all partners in education of our commitment to support the ongoing processes and consultations required to effectively deal with the difficulties presented by this pandemic.

Some key priorities and concerns for practical and effective school reopening identified by NPCPP are listed below:

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NPCPP – PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON RETURN TO SCHOOL 2020

- Schools must have sufficient hand washing facilities and availability of hot water, antibacterial washes, hand sanitiser to satisfy the hygienic requirements for toilet facilities and general health requirements for large group interaction.
- Induction and ongoing health training - for students and staff is vital. A comprehensive training programme is required for all staff to understand their additional responsibilities and actions to enable safe school re-opening.
- COVID-19 Safety support for schools. A designated, trained, ‘COVID-19 co-ordinator’ in each school supported by DES COVID-19 Liaison officers available as and when required.
- Adequate pastoral care and counselling support and professional resources.
- Vulnerable students or those with vulnerable family members/residents of home to be identified prior to school reopening and specific actions put in place to protect these students, while maintaining dignity and confidentiality in so far as possible.
- Sufficient provision of Common areas and use of outside space.
- Safe procedures with adequate spacing in classrooms and in corridors.
- Early identification of infection. Possible temperature checks as staff and students enter school.
- There should be a small isolation space or room available for student/staff member to await for collection where COVID-19 is identified.
- Clear, effective and safe procedure and monitoring of arrival and departure.
- Clear processes and procedures for school transport & drop-off/pick-up, sports, meetings etc. This will possibly result in reduced capacity, requirement for mask wearing and assigned seating and cleaning of buses post each trip.
- Ongoing monitoring of COVID-19 safety requirements.
- A return to a normal school calendar and as normal a school experience as quickly as possible.
- Facility for virtual Parent/Teacher meetings and School/Home communication.
- Adaptability and the supported ability to respond quickly to identified problems or issues in each individual school. This will require input and co-operation from those ‘on the ground’ and financial and practical assistance and support by the state and DES.
- Confidence in the ability of schools to manage and cope with any future pandemics.

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