



## *Return to School (February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2021)*

### *Summary*

- On Monday 1 March the first four classes at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to in-person learning. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools. There will be a period of time between each phase to assess the impact of reopening on aspects of community transmission.
- Monday 15 March is the target date for the return to in-person learning of third to sixth class students at primary level, and fifth year Leaving Certificate students. Monday 12 April, following the Easter break is the target date for the return to in-person learning of first to fourth year students at post-primary level.
- This phase (March 1<sup>st</sup>) is in addition to the previous staged reopening which saw special schools reopen on February 11<sup>th</sup> on a 50% attendance basis. All special classes returned to in-person learning on a full time basis from February 22<sup>nd</sup>, and this plan will see special schools return to full-time in-person education from March 1<sup>st</sup>.
  - In total 124 special schools are now open, which cater for 8,224 students.
  - There are 1,231 special classes at primary level catering for 7,520 students. They are supported by 3,819 teachers and SNAs.
  - There are 515 special classes at post primary catering for 2,808 students. They are supported by 1,739 teachers and SNAs.
- Further supports will be put in place for children with special education needs in mainstream classes who are not in the first four years of primary school or in 6<sup>th</sup> year. These are :
  - Primary schools will be asked to prioritise deployment of their special education teacher resources to facilitate the engagement of those pupils with SEN who are in 3rd-6th classes during this initial 2 week period from March 1 to 15 when it is intended all primary school students will return. Boards of Management will have flexibility in the deployment of the SET teachers in their schools.
  - The supplementary programme currently in place for students with additional needs, which allows students to access 5 hours of home tuition per week, will be extended by a further two weeks (ten hours of provision) for children in third – sixth class of primary school and for post-primary students not returning in this phase commencing on March 1st.
  - An enhanced programme of summer provision for children with additional needs and those who are experiencing educational disadvantage, similar to what was provided in summer 2020 is being developed



### *Is it safe to reopen schools?*

- As part of the *Living with Covid Plan*, Government has decided on a phased plan for the safe, gradual reopening of schools for in-person learning, to limit the impact of the mobility of the one-million strong school population. There will be a period of time between each phase to assess the impact of reopening.
- Public health has reviewed the measures put in place to ensure safe operation of schools and is satisfied that these provide strong mitigation and should be followed carefully by students, staff and parents.
- All provision within schools will continue according to public health advice developed for educational settings and the Department will continue to fund and support as necessary infection prevention and control measures in schools to ensure the safety of the school community. In total, a budget package of €639 million has been put in place by the Department to fund Covid-19 related measures, including funding for PPE, sanitation and additional cleaning, replacement staff for very-high risk members of staff, capital funding, and other Covid-19 measures.

### *What happens if there is a Covid-19 case in a school?*

- Schools teams have been put in place to support schools since October and will support schools during the phased return and beyond. These teams are led by public health professionals and supplemented by members of the Department of Education's Inspectorate.
- When a positive case arises in a school community, the local Public Health team will work with the school and undertake a Public Health Risk Assessment. Once the risk assessment is complete, the Department of Public Health will then advise the school of the public health instructions which then should be followed by the school.
- In instances where there is a positive case in a school there will be dedicated testing of close contacts and appointments for testing will be prioritised through a specific school referral process. This approach will also involve a fast turnaround time for reporting of the results of tests sent to the laboratory which have a unique identifier.
- Furthermore, a designated phone line has been put in place to support principals where a positive case of Covid-19 has been identified. This will operate 7 days a week.

### *Provision for very high-risk children and students*



- The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and HSE published guidance in relation to the return to school for at risk groups. The advice confirms that for the vast majority of children, including those with underlying medical conditions themselves and those children with immediate family members, including parents, in both the 'high risk' and 'very high risk' categories can return to school.
- Public health advice recognises that it is important for the overall health and wellbeing for children to attend school. This is consistent with public health advice internationally in relation to at-risk family members.
- In circumstance where pupils cannot return to school because they are medically certified as being at very high risk to COVID-19 the Minister for Education and her Department has published guidance to support schools in making adapted education provision. It is important that these pupils who are extremely vulnerable to Covid-19 due to an underlying medical condition maintain a meaningful connection with their class and school to successfully continue their learning from home.
- In all other circumstances the public health advice is that it is safe for children to attend school and it remains important for all parents/family members, particularly those at high-risk and very high risk, to continue to follow public health advice to minimise their likelihood of possible exposure.