



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Submission to the COVID-19 Inquiry by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation

September 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global crisis that profoundly disrupted every facet of Irish society, with education among the most significantly affected sectors. From the earliest days of the emergency, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) adopted a clear position that public health advice must be the primary determinant of all decisions relating to the operation of primary and special education, in recognition of the scale and uncertain nature of the pandemic. This principle guided the union's actions throughout the pandemic, informing our advocacy, negotiations, and communications with members, government departments, and the wider public.

The closure of schools on 12 March 2020 marked the beginning of a period of extraordinary upheaval. The INTO immediately transitioned into crisis management mode. The union cancelled events, took steps to move staff to remote work to ensure the continuity of the union's work and sought to deliver ongoing and comprehensive support to our members. It was clear early on that navigating the pandemic would require swift responses to the immediate challenges facing our members, but also a sustained engagement with evolving public health guidance and educational policy. The INTO's early interventions included campaigning for the continuation of the school meals scheme, advocating for substitute teachers, and challenging the Department of Education's (DE) unilateral publication of remote learning guidance without consultation, which caused considerable confusion and angst within the primary and special education community.

As the crisis deepened, the INTO was a central stakeholder in the national response. The union provided extensive resources to members, including FAQs, well-being advice and guidance on home-based learning. It also engaged in detailed consultations with activists and national committees to identify the key issues that would need to be addressed before schools could safely reopen. The INTO's submission to the DE in May 2020 emphasised the need for a collaborative, well-resourced, and health-led approach to reopening. The union warned against premature decisions and insisted that any return to in-person teaching must be underpinned by robust public health advice and meaningful engagement with teaching unions.

Throughout the summer of 2020, the INTO played a key role in shaping the *Schools' COVID-19 Response Plan*. The union secured commitments on enhanced cleaning, personal protective equipment (PPE) provision, signage, staff training, and the suspension of inspections and initiatives. The INTO also worked with other stakeholders, including the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) and the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), to commission expert advice and ensure that reopening plans were informed by the latest public health advice and practical for a primary or special school setting. The union's leadership appeared before the Oireachtas Special Committee on the COVID-19 Response to highlight the sector's needs and advocate for a safe and sustainable return to education.

The reopening of schools in September 2020 brought with it new challenges. The INTO secured a review mechanism for vulnerable staff, revised guidance on face coverings and ventilation, and we continued to press for improvements in testing and tracing. The union condemned the government's failure to provide sector-specific testing and demanded urgent public health reviews as infection rates rose. The INTO's advocacy was informed by the lived experiences of our members, who reported increasing anxiety, inadequate resources and a lack of clarity in official governmental communications.

As the second wave of COVID-19 emerged in late 2020, the INTO intensified its efforts to protect school communities. The union made a strong case for the reopening of schools in January 2021 to be delayed while an updated public health assessment was undertaken, in light of strong evidence of a surge in the prevalence of a new

strain of the virus across the country, which ultimately led to the decision by the Department of Education to delay the reopening. The union robustly defended itself against accusations from the government, including from the then Minister for Education, Norma Foley, that it was acting disingenuously. Subsequently, in an interview in February, the Taoiseach, Mícheál Martin, admitted that “notwithstanding the fact that the public health specialists were clear in their minds that with the proper safety protocols that schools were safe places in themselves, the numbers, I think, were just too high at that time to get people [back]. You can’t coerce people back into schools in the middle of a pandemic”. The INTO cited the rapidly evolving public health landscape and emphasised the necessity of adequate planning and resourcing to ensure the safe operation of schools. The union also prompted the Department of Education to host a public health webinar for teaching staff, which was attended by thousands of teachers. The union received an overwhelming level of contact from members setting out understandable concerns at this juncture, which as a trade union, it was our duty to speak out on. Comments made by politicians at this crucial period only sought to make a difficult situation even more challenging. An example was the appalling comments made by then Minister of State for Special Education, Josepha Madigan, comparing the delayed reopening of schools with the shameful Mother and Baby Homes chapter. While those comments were ultimately retracted and a full apology was offered by the Minister, at the urging of this union, they serve to demonstrate efforts by senior government leaders to demonise the trade union rather than accept responsibility for governmental failure to address the concerns of members.¹

In 2021 and 2022, the INTO continued to advocate for improved mitigation measures, including the rollout of antigen testing, the distribution of CO₂ monitors throughout, the continuation of special leave with pay to enable self-isolation following a positive test result and the consideration of teachers and all frontline workers who were dealing face-to-face with the public as regards the prioritisation of the vaccination schedule. The union addressed the growing substitution crisis, supported schools facing anti-mask protests, and welcomed the introduction of the Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS) to address educational regression. The INTO also worked to ensure that pregnant and medically vulnerable teachers received appropriate protection and accommodations.

It must be stated that the messaging from public health authorities was at times confusing and vague when it came to education settings. Track and tracing, particularly in school settings, simply did not work effectively and placed an unbearable burden on school leaders who were on call day and night and during school holidays to respond to positive cases. School principals being advised that they could not share information on school outbreaks with key school staff, some of whom were medically vulnerable or had caring responsibilities, who were ill or immunocompromised, caused considerable stress in school communities.

Throughout the pandemic, the INTO’s actions were guided by a commitment to evidence-based decision-making and the protection of school communities. The union’s engagement with government departments, public health authorities, and other key stakeholders was undertaken with this overarching goal as we sought to constructively engage throughout the pandemic.

There was a widespread acknowledgement that schools, particularly primary and special schools, presented a unique challenge in the context of the pandemic. The mixing of students from different family groups and the presence of vulnerable children and adults make schools a place where infections and viruses have always been a concern. Additionally, school closures presented challenges for childcare, both for essential workers and those working from home. Rolling messages suggesting that schools were safe, while the overall situation was deemed to be unsafe for most of society, undermined the legitimate concerns being raised by members of school communities.

Emergency grants, such as the enhanced ICT grant funding, were introduced in recognition that schools did not have adequate access to ICT infrastructure. The withdrawal of these grants as the pandemic came to an end means schools will remain similarly underinvested in these areas should another such event take place.

Our submission to this Inquiry seeks to reflect on our work to represent our members throughout the pandemic, to stand up for our school communities and to explore the lessons that must inform future policy. The union believes that public health and safety must remain central to educational decision-making, that equity requires sustained investment, and that collaboration is essential to an effective crisis response.

¹ [Josepha Madigan apologises “fully” for comparing children with special needs not attending school to mother and baby homes | Irish Independent](#)

Commentary circulating in the public sphere, including on social media, had a significant influence during the pandemic and should be examined by this inquiry. From charged political statements that sought to obscure responsibility or undermine the work of workers' representatives, to the emergence of coordinated, sophisticated misinformation and disinformation campaigns online, these influences should be studied to help ensure a better response in the future, one we hope will never be needed.

The pandemic demonstrated the resilience and dedication of Ireland's teachers and school leaders. Their professionalism and goodwill were instrumental in sustaining primary and special education through the most difficult periods of the crisis. The INTO calls on the Inquiry to formally recognise their vital contribution during this extraordinary time.

Yours sincerely,



John Boyle

INTO General Secretary

2

CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

2.1 COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic

2.11 March 2020

Following the publication by the Department of Education (DE) of advice for schools on 5 March 2020 and the publication of [Circular 0020/2020](#) on 9 March 2020, the INTO moved into crisis management mode. When An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD, announced without warning on 12 March 2020 that schools would close for a period of two weeks, INTO General Secretary John Boyle welcomed the decision, calling it “important and timely” in light of the growing public health crisis.²

The INTO’s Central Executive Committee (CEC) met at INTO Head Office on 13 March 2020 and subsequently, decisions were made to enable the organisation to function effectively. INTO staff began working remotely from 18 March, and decisions were taken to cancel our Youth Conference, due to be held on 13-14 March, and postpone our Annual Congress taking place the following month in compliance with public health guidance.

School leaders were surveyed in March to understand the challenges being faced and the INTO campaigned successfully for the continuation of the school meals scheme during the Easter holidays and, in conjunction with the ASTI and TUI, called for prioritisation and support for substitute teachers on 25 March.^{3,4}

On 26 March 2020, the three teaching unions, the INTO, ASTI, and TUI, wrote to the Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh TD, demanding protections for substitute teachers. They highlighted that if substitute members were not eligible for the government’s temporary wage subsidy scheme, equivalent support must be provided.

INTO General Secretary John Boyle raised the issue directly with the Minister, stressing the urgent need for a resolution.⁵

On 25 March 2020, the INTO announced two €10,000 donations to the Society of St Vincent de Paul and Barnardos to support vulnerable children and families during the pandemic. Speaking at the time, INTO General Secretary John Boyle stated: “Our members have expressed their deep concern for our most vulnerable pupils, especially those who are homeless or come from families in our most disadvantaged areas. We felt we had to do more, and I’m delighted we could support the trojan work of both The Society of St Vincent de Paul and Barnardos”.⁶

2.12 April 2020

Following publication of DE guidance on remote learning, the INTO wrote to the then Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh TD, on 3 April 2020 to condemn the lack of consultation with the union in drawing up this guidance. The INTO also wrote to the Minister for Education, and Mr Seán Ó Foghlú, Secretary General, Department of Education, seeking further clarification after the DE decided on 10 April that schools would remain closed until further notice.⁷

2 [Primary schools to close \(COVID-19\) - INTO](#)

3 [Survey - school leaders asked what support they need right now! - INTO](#)

4 [Correspondence to then Minister for Education and Skills Joe McHugh TD, dated 25 March 2020 - INTO](#)

5 [Unions demand protections for substitute teachers - INTO](#)

6 [INTO supports SVP and Barnardos during unprecedented crisis - INTO](#)

7 [INTO condemns lack of consultation on school continuity guidance - INTO](#)

In the weeks following the subsequent extended closure of schools, the INTO published FAQs, advice and guidance for members relating to home learning and self-care and continued to provide updates, advice and guidance on its COVID-19 Support Hub through April, May and June 2020.

INTO General Secretary John Boyle was clear when speaking to media in April 2020 that he would like to see primary schools reopened on an “orderly, phased basis” but stressed the need for adequate protections to be in place for students, parents and teachers.⁸

As teachers rallied to deal with the arrival of the pandemic, the INTO led calls to commend them for their hard work.⁹

2.13 **May and June 2020**

All INTO face-to-face events scheduled for May and June were cancelled, but communication with members continued via electronic media. In early May, the INTO consulted widely with elected branch and district officers, as well as national committee members, to identify the key issues which had to be considered in detail before schools could reopen.

Subsequently, the INTO made a detailed submission to the DE on 14 May 2020 and, together with the British and Irish Group of Teacher Unions (BIGTU), expressed deep concern about any premature reopening of schools, warning that “any decision to reopen our primary schools must be led primarily by public health advice. In advance of the reopening of schools there must be meaningful engagement with workers and their unions”.^{10 11}

Guidelines on access to schools were published on 15 May after representations from the INTO, and formal engagement on the safe and orderly reopening of schools began on 27 May 2020.

The INTO sought agreement on the following principles to govern the operation of schools/education provision during the COVID-19 pandemic, including that:

- ✳ Priority must be given to the safety and physical/mental health and wellbeing of staff, pupils and parents in primary schools;
- ✳ Children’s learning and development, including their wellbeing, must be supported by schools and relevant support services such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), which must be increased to cope with the needs of school communities;
- ✳ A collaborative approach to developing and implementing procedures and protocols at the national level is essential. Individual schools cannot be asked to develop their own guidance;
- ✳ All key decision makers should approach the health, safety and well-being of each other with compassion and understanding;
- ✳ Adequate resources must be allocated to schools by the DE to implement the comprehensive health and safety measures required for schools to operate safely; and
- ✳ There must be an acknowledgement that, for the duration of the public health crisis, there would be a need to accommodate a changed school environment in terms of the suspension of inspections and initiatives.

In addition, the INTO demanded that the following be put in place:

- ✳ Clear and unambiguous guidance from the government;
- ✳ Adequate funding for additional cleaning and other critical services in schools;
- ✳ New school policy templates where necessary;
- ✳ Access to any prescribed health and safety equipment;
- ✳ Training for cleaning staff;
- ✳ A thorough child-friendly information campaign, including educational videos and signage to help pupils understand social distancing and personal hygiene requirements.

8 [Govt keen to reopen schools but no date set - Varadkar - RTE News](#)

9 [INTO is proud of the work of its members at this time - Tipperary Live](#)

10 [British and Irish teacher trade unions warn against premature reopening of schools - INTO](#)

11 [Teaching unions warn reopening schools without caution could lead to spike in COVID-19 - Irish Examiner](#)

INTO General Secretary John Boyle attended all meetings with DE officials and key primary and special education stakeholders. These meetings were held on the following dates 23 and 26 March; 3, 15, 21, 29 April; 13, 21, 27 May; 5, 10, 11, 19, 26 June; 3, 7, 13, 16, 22, 24, 31 July; 7, 19, 20 August.

The INTO continued to seek standardised guidance on issues such as testing, end-of-year reports, school support for vulnerable pupils, appointments to posts of responsibility and school self-evaluation (SSE).

The DE published a framework document on the reopening of schools on 12 June and then wrote to clarify several issues which had been raised by the INTO. Following the INTO campaign for the extension of the summer programme for children with special educational needs (SEN) and children in DEIS schools, the DE issued guidance on 23 June 2020.¹²

The CPSMA, INTO and IPPN had engaged the services of a health and safety consultant and Professor Daire Keogh, president of Dublin City University, chaired the working group between the three organisations. Their work influenced the publication of a *Schools' COVID-19 Response Plan* before the commencement of summer provision on 1 July.

2.14 July and August 2020

Oireachtas Committee

Then INTO President Mary Magner and General Secretary John Boyle appeared before the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19 response on 2 July 2020. In his opening statement, the General Secretary drew attention to the pandemic's devastating effect on Irish society and noted that education was a key sector that could play a leading role in addressing the negative consequences.¹³

Negotiations on school reopening

The INTO engaged intensively with key primary and special education stakeholders, and made detailed submissions and provided feedback to the DE on a wide range of issues and draft documents relating to the reopening of schools, including:

- ✳ A *COVID-19 School Response Plan* (which detailed a school policy, staff induction training, appointment of lead worker representative, signage, illustrative classroom layouts, risk assessments, infection control measures and how to deal with suspected cases of COVID-19 in a school setting). Clarifications on the provision of additional cover for certain categories of teachers' leave of absence.
- ✳ The INTO advocated for the wide use of supply panels to enable the provision of adequate cover for teachers who presented with COVID-19 symptoms and were therefore instructed not to attend their school.
- ✳ Covid Special Leave with Pay for teachers, including clarifications on when such leave could be taken.
- ✳ Curriculum guidance for primary school leaders and teachers.
- ✳ A presentation on well-being in school communities.
- ✳ Guidelines to help schools with the drawdown of hand sanitisers and (from the government procurement portal).
- ✳ Details of a funding package for enhanced cleaning of school buildings.

The INTO prioritised the issue of cover for absent teachers, to ensure that classes would not be split if their teacher was absent. This was particularly relevant due to Ireland's shamefully large class sizes. The INTO engaged with the Teaching Council with a view to fast-tracking the registration of newly qualified primary teachers in Ireland and from overseas to take up substitute teaching posts. It is perhaps notable that class pod maps, designed for schools in Europe, were not suited to Irish educational settings due to Ireland's over crowded class sizes.

The INTO supported the DE and fellow stakeholders with the establishment of 115 teacher supply panels covering 2,296 receiving schools. The CEC also assisted teaching principals who wished to form clusters of five schools for the purpose of appointing fixed-term teachers to cover their weekly release days. In total, 215 clusters serving 1,075 schools were secured by the INTO.

¹² [INTO secures clarity on staff training and public health advice for summer provision - INTO](#)

¹³ [Special Committee on COVID-19 Response debate - Thursday, 2 July 2020 - INTO](#)

The roadmap for the full return to school was published on 27 July. *Circular 0045/2020* published on 28 July, outlined the key supports being made available to schools.^{14 15}

Before schools reopened in September, the INTO secured a review mechanism for teachers who wished to have their risk category reassessed and several members were re-categorised in late August. Further members were re-categorised in late October. The INTO also secured revised guidance on the wearing of face coverings, visitor policy, staff meetings, assemblies and ventilation of schools. Clarification was also secured on the right of a school to refuse access to a staff member or pupil who had not observed the mandatory requirement to self-isolate in accordance with public health advice.

The appointment of Lead Worker Representatives in schools, as in other workplaces, was helpful. However, education staff who undertook this role noted that a lack of training or awareness of the workload challenges associated with this role hampered the effectiveness of the representation in school settings.

2.15 September – November 2020

Oireachtas Special Committee

On 2 September 2020, the INTO attended a further hearing of the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19 Response¹⁶ to discuss the latest developments in respect of the reopening of schools and the challenges which remain. Attention was drawn to the need for the following:

- ✳ clear advice and guidance for parents, supported by a national media campaign to ensure 'buy-in' from the entire school community;
- ✳ facilitation of teachers in the high-risk category;
- ✳ assurances that everyone in the education sector would have quick access to testing and tracing and that there would be ongoing surveillance of the system;
- ✳ ongoing stakeholder consultation to ensure that any changes in circumstances could be anticipated, planned for, or reacted to in a timely and comprehensive manner;
- ✳ a review at the end of September 2020 to be cross-governmental and include input from the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), Health Service Executive (HSE), the Inspectorate and stakeholders.

The General Secretary also emphasised the large size of primary classes compared with the EU average and the inadequate spaces they inhabit. In addition, the degree to which the system relies on the goodwill and professionalism of school leaders was highlighted.

CEC review of school reopening

After a special meeting on 17 September, the CEC condemned the failure of the government to provide fast-tracked sector-specific testing and tracing and a dedicated helpline for schools, mindful of the unique landscape of schools for viral transmission. The CEC also demanded a meeting with the Chief Inspector to discuss the planned rollout of SSRS advisory visits.¹⁷

Second wave of COVID-19

When the rates of community infection began to increase dramatically in early October 2020 and the government decided that schools would remain open while the country was at level five of the *Framework for Living with COVID-19*, the INTO demanded an immediate public health review. In addition, the union wrote to the Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, demanding an urgent meeting of the education stakeholder group.

¹⁴ [INTO welcomes plans for schools reopening, supports for principals and substitute panels. Further clarity on substitute cover needed - INTO](#)

¹⁵ [Circular 0045/2020 - Department of Education and Skills](#)

¹⁶ [Special Committee on COVID-19 Response debate - Wednesday, 2 September 2020 - Houses of the Oireachtas](#)

¹⁷ [Union opposes absolutist approach to keeping schools open at all costs - INTO](#)

Meetings with public health representatives

On 19 October, the INTO set out five clear requirements for schools to remain open safely. These were as follows:

- ⌘ The publication of the exact number of school staff who had tested positive since September, categorised by school type – primary/special school and by staff roles, and publication of the medical evidence supporting the continuation of attendance in schools of staff who are pregnant or are in the high-risk category of health.
- ⌘ A clear explanation of the difference between a close contact and casual contact in a school setting. When HSE risk assessments are conducted following confirmation of a positive case in a school, there must be direct consultation with all staff associated with the class in which the confirmed case is based. It was stated that it was essential that the class and staff in question are tested within 24 hours and that they restrict movement until the testing and tracing process is complete.
- ⌘ An urgent review of the policy on the wearing of face coverings by pupils and school staff.
- ⌘ An additional suite of protective measures for primary and special schools in areas where level four of the government's framework applied including the immediate banning of extra-curricular activities, the restriction of parents/guardians congregating at school grounds to a maximum of 15 mask-wearing adults at any given time, a strict no visitors policy for all schools and the provision of funding to ensure that teachers and pupils could engage with remote learning.
- ⌘ An evidence-based public health decision on the status of primary and special schools, where their communities are at level five, must be communicated to education stakeholders, including the INTO, after consultation and engagement, by the end of October.

Following this statement and the general secretary's assertion in the national media that the testing and tracing system for schools was not fit for purpose, two public health doctors began weekly meetings with the education stakeholders to provide weekly reports on testing and tracing in education settings.

On 21 October 2020, the INTO provided a written submission to the Joint Committee on Education Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science, on the subject of *Ensuring that Schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable*. In the submission, the INTO called for clear protocols and practical actions to be put in place immediately, so that schools could prepare for and react appropriately to any changes in public health advice.¹⁸

School support teams, public health review

During the October mid-term break, the INTO continued to press the DE and health authorities to provide additional data, supports and assurances to schools ahead of the second part of the term. Correspondence and meetings resulted in a number of improvements being secured by the INTO, including School Support Teams, a Public Health Review and weekly reports on testing and tracing in schools. The government also agreed to the provision of a dedicated phone line for principals and augmented school support teams in all HSE areas.

2.16 December 2020

On foot of INTO demands for a public awareness campaign, the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Tony Holohan, wrote to parents on 16 December to underline the importance of adhering to public health advice over the Christmas break.

On 16 December, the INTO met Department officials and public health experts at the final scheduled weekly meeting of 2020. The INTO highlighted the rising rate of community infection and increasing anxiety among INTO members about the number of school outbreaks since early December. Public health officials argued that the two-week Christmas break would alleviate any pressure, and the first meeting of 2021 was scheduled for 13 January, one week after schools were due to reopen.

¹⁸ [Ensuring that schools are open in a manner which is both safe and sustainable - INTO](#)

Christmas 2020

Over Christmas 2020, increasing numbers of members contacted the union, outlining their concerns around contracting the virus, having to self-isolate or restrict movement and risk spreading infection to family members over the holiday period. The INTO's representations for an earlier end to the first term from 18 December were not supported by public health and DE officials, which caused considerable and avoidable anxiety right across the teaching profession.

Throughout Christmas week 2020, the INTO continued to engage with officials at the DE, calling for public health risk assessments for schools while the infection rates began to spiral out of control in communities.

As an emergency meeting of the cabinet was scheduled for 30 December, the INTO called for a deferral of the reopening of schools to Monday, 11 January. Government acceded to the request, and a three-day extension to the Christmas holidays was announced.

2.17 January 2021

Throughout the Christmas holidays and into the new year, the union received an outpouring of concern from members across the country, contacting the union in considerable numbers to share their personal experiences or to set out their strong concern at the deteriorating public health landscape.

On Monday, 4 January, education stakeholders were informed that schools would fully reopen on 11 January. Assurance was given that advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) to support this decision was given on 31 December 2020. The INTO, supported by other education stakeholders, demanded that in view of the fast-changing nature of the virus, including the emergence of a new strain, any decision regarding the reopening of schools must be underpinned by more up-to-date public health advice, especially given the changes being witnessed week to week and the need to respond to the surging anxiety in school communities.

Following media reports that the cabinet subcommittee would be recommending that special schools and special classes reopen on 11 January, a significant number of members contacted the INTO, with thousands more expressing their concern on social media channels.

On 6 January, proposals were outlined, namely that mainstream schools would remain closed for January, but special schools and special classes would reopen on 11 January. Managerial authorities, principals and deputy principal associations and trade unions expressed concerns about the government decision and called for a deferral so that the reopening could be properly planned and resourced.¹⁹

The INTO wrote to Minister Madigan and Minister Foley on 7 January, requesting that they reconsider their decision to resume in-school special education support from 11 January. It was announced later that night that special schools and special classes would not reopen on 11 January.^{20 21}

A further meeting on 8 January focussed on provision for pupils with SEN. The CEC considered the issues at a special meeting, and more than 300 INTO branch and district officers were briefed by the general secretary on Saturday, 9 January, at an online meeting.

On 11 January, at a meeting of the BIGTU, all general secretaries in attendance expressed concern regarding the reopening of schools while transmission and infection rates remained so high.

¹⁹ [Rushed and reckless decision on reopening special educational settings risks undermining public health objectives - INTO](#)

²⁰ [Following NPHE meeting, INTO writes to Ministers Foley and Madigan - INTO](#)

²¹ [Planned reopening of special schools and classes deferred - INTO](#)

Stakeholder engagement

Union members contacted branch and district officers, CEC representatives and the INTO directly by email and phone and took to social media to express their growing frustration and fear that their workplaces were not safe. Every day, more members raised unease, and the atmosphere became increasingly tense. This tension was fuelled by deliberate and unhelpful political commentary, which made it harder to address members' genuine worries and to identify the steps needed to protect them and their workplaces, as well as to plan for the safe reopening of primary and special schools. Attempts to place blame on the union for the necessary delay in reopening, or to suggest that it was our role to dismiss the concerns of thousands of members who had contacted us, were deeply unhelpful.

It was against this backdrop that the INTO held three separate meetings with DE officials on 12 January regarding the reopening of special education facilities. This was followed on 13 January by a meeting with the INTO, CPSMA and DE officials. The CEC agreed that it would not object to reopening on Thursday, 21 January, provided several assurances were received - including accommodation made for staff in high-risk categories, those over age 60 and those who were pregnant, concerns raised by our members.^{22 23}

It should be noted that many pregnant members remained out of work on extended certified sick leave, using up this leave, when other options were not made available to this cohort. This caused considerable anxiety among this group.

Public Health webinar

Prompted by the INTO, the DE hosted a public health webinar for education staff.

Given the prevailing level of frustration and fear, and the consistent stream of mixed messages from central government and public health and charged political attacks on the school profession from government figures, the INTO demanded that more information be provided to members about the steps the DE and public health authorities would be taking to ensure the safety of our members when schools reopened. Such was the interest in a public health webinar organised by the DE that it was oversubscribed and was forced to move to YouTube, where a total of 16,000 people watched along, with limited safeguards on comment moderation or privacy deployed, meaning the webinar was open to anyone to view or interact with.

It was clear that the DE had failed to consider the level of hostility amongst the profession at this time, influenced heavily by the factors mentioned above. It was, therefore, a disappointment that steps were not taken to better plan for the delivery of the webinar. Sharp comments were largely the result of stress, worry and mixed messages on public health advice. On one hand, teachers were told schools are safe, on the other hand, Dr Ronan Glynn advised during the webinar that "whenever you have levels of transmission like this, the reality is that schools are threatened", while regular Government information broadcasts continually told the public to stay at home for the safety of themselves and their loved ones. It was clear that the webinar did little to boost confidence within school communities. If anything, the information provided during the webinar – and the manner in which it was delivered, without the opportunity for engagement or to raise questions – only served to increase our members' concerns for their own safety and that of their pupils and their families. Teachers were frustrated that there was no option to have their questions raised and addressed during the webinar; however, to reiterate, the INTO does not condone any form of personal abuse which may have been engaged in during the webinar and would urge the DE to consider the lessons which might be learnt from the technical configuration of this webinar for the future.

Joint INTO/FÓRSA statement

On 19 January, the executive committees of both the Fórsa and INTO met to consider the current situation with respect to the reopening of schools. Both unions' executives heard concerns that many parents whose children have SENs and additional underlying health conditions don't have confidence in sending their children back to school at this time.

22 [Update on engagement with department officials – reopening of schools - INTO](#)

23 [Update: Serious safety concerns must be addressed prior to any reopening of schools - INTO](#)

The unions urged the Government to postpone the resumption of school-based SEN services until further discussions could achieve improved safety measures, including Covid testing, leading to the resumption of all school services.

INTO General Secretary John Boyle said the fundamental problem was conflicting health messaging, which had left many school staff totally unconvinced that the school environment was safe under current conditions. He added that the education department webinar, which attracted over 16,000 participants, clearly demonstrated the level of fear and anxiety among school staff.

He said: "We are calling on the Government to avoid a confrontational approach that forces a reopening on tens of thousands of fearful staff who want to follow public health advice. Instead, they should continue to work with us to ensure that schools are safe for students and staff."²⁴

Re-engagement with the Department of Education

DE officials met primary and special education stakeholders on 19 January, and the INTO and Fórsa were informed that staff in the high-risk category, those who were pregnant and staff aged 60 plus would be permitted to work remotely for the duration of the interim programme. The DE subsequently announced that it was abandoning plans for reopening on 21 January.

As mentioned in the executive summary, 'blame game' tactics and attacks from senior government figures, alongside wholly inappropriate comments at the time from the Minister of State for Special Education, since retracted, only served to make a difficult situation worse.²⁵

2.18 February – March 2021

The INTO and Fórsa met with DE officials on 22 January. CEC members consulted with members in special schools and special classes over the weekend. The INTO met representatives from special schools on 29 January to listen to their concerns and establish their readiness for any phased reopening by mid-February. The executive committees of both the INTO and Fórsa met on 1 February to consider the draft proposals for the phased reopening of special schools and special classes.²⁶

The INTO and Fórsa then met DE officials on 1 February²⁷ with a view to finalising plans for the resumption of in-school support for children in special schools and special classes. Following a special meeting of the CEC, the INTO released a statement outlining the assurances that had been given in advance of the phased reopening of schools, including:

- ✎ Robust risk mitigation measures.
- ✎ Augmented school support teams in all the HSE areas to provide advice, contact tracing and bulk fast-track testing.
- ✎ Flexible arrangements for staff in high-risk health categories to continue working from home throughout the interim programme.
- ✎ Financial support for families who wish to transport their children to school for the duration of the programme.
- ✎ The publication of school-based testing reports to inform our understanding of transmission rates in schools during the interim period.
- ✎ High-grade face masks to be provided to any teacher who seeks them.
- ✎ A public awareness campaign designed to ensure compliance with public health advice in schools.
- ✎ Clarity on the higher priority rating of special education staff within the vaccination schedule.

²⁴ [Teachers and SNAs call for postponement of schools' reopening - INTO](#)

²⁵ [Josepha Madigan apologises "fully" for comparing children with special needs not attending school to mother and baby homes- Irish Independent](#)

²⁶ [Teachers and SNAs call for postponement of schools' reopening - INTO](#)

²⁷ [Plans and protocols for partial and phased resumption of special schools and special classes - INTO](#)

Special schools reopened on 11 February. Special classes reopened on 22 February and junior classes in mainstream primary schools returned to school buildings on 1 March, with senior classes returning on 15 March 2021. The INTO hosted a webinar for school leaders in advance of the planned reopening.

Following consultation with the Department of Education, the INTO ensured that several necessary additional supports for primary and special schools would be in place²⁸, including:

- ⌘ Augmented school support teams in all the HSE areas to provide advice, contact tracing and bulk fast-track testing where required.
- ⌘ Flexible arrangements for staff in high-risk health categories to continue working from home throughout the first phase of the return of mainstream schools. Pregnant teachers were not required to return to classroom teaching for the phased period and were to continue to work remotely until further notice.
- ⌘ The publication of school-based testing and tracing reports, every week, to inform the understanding of transmission rates in schools during the interim period.
- ⌘ High-grade face masks to be provided to any teacher working in special education or delivering personal care or attention, including the administration of first aid. These masks are to be available through the schools' procurement process. The INTO encouraged members to request that these be provided by their schools and to wear them daily.
- ⌘ A public awareness campaign designed to ensure compliance with public health advice in schools and to remind wider society of its responsibility and role in supporting the sustainability of schools during the pandemic.
- ⌘ Confirmation that education staff would be in the first one-third of the population within the vaccination schedule.
- ⌘ Several risk mitigation measures sought by the INTO were accepted; other measures were kept under review. Specifically, the provision of air ventilation monitors and regular antigen testing, which the INTO sought, was not taken on board by the government at that time, nor were face masks recommended for pupils in senior classes.

The INTO continued to argue that these mitigation measures could help to minimise the risk of infection spreading in classrooms, thereby creating safer school settings for our members and their pupils. In addition, the INTO encouraged schools to adopt a strict approach to congregation zones, mandating that any adults and pupils congregating in the vicinity of school buildings wear a visible face mask.

Vaccinations

When the national vaccination schedule was first announced, the INTO received a written commitment from the Government that teachers would be included within the prioritisation of frontline public-facing workers. DE officials and public health staff also confirmed that they supported priority access being given to special education staff within the overall cohort of workers in the education sector.

On 30 March, the Government announced a revised approach to the roll-out of the vaccination programme, with the new approach being based on age. The INTO sought an emergency meeting with the Department of Education to protest strongly against any downgrading of the teaching profession on the vaccination list.²⁹

Always conscious of the need to protect the most vulnerable in our society, the INTO consistently called for parallel priority vaccination for the elderly and vulnerable to be prioritised alongside frontline essential workers such as teachers, healthcare staff and Gardaí in public-facing roles.

²⁸ [Guidance published – phased return of special schools and special classes - INTO](#)

²⁹ [INTO concerned by media reports re: potential changes to National Vaccination Programme - INTO](#)

2.2 Teacher union conferences - April 2021

2.21 Joint teacher union resolution

At the Easter Conferences which were held online, the INTO, ASTI and TUI adopted a joint resolution, condemning the government's failure to prioritise teachers for vaccination, committing to work together to seek a guarantee on vaccination and to assess the need to utilise all options open to the unions to ensure our members were vaccinated before the commencement of the 2021/22 school year in September. Immediately after the annual conferences, the three unions wrote to the Department of Education seeking an urgent meeting with officials.³⁰

A new age-based twin-track vaccine rollout plan was announced and became operational from Monday, 5 July. By September, 90% of adults in Ireland were fully vaccinated.

2.3 Pregnant and medically vulnerable members

In January 2021, the DE stated that an expert group was working to develop guidance on the risk to pregnant teachers and advised that during the period of phased return to school, any pregnant teacher who worked in a special school or class should consider themselves in the very-high-risk category and the teacher should temporarily continue to work remotely

In July, HSE guidance was issued for the education sector, based on recommendations from the Institute for Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, in respect of very-high-risk and pregnant employees, recommending that all pregnant teachers should submit a *COVID-19 Risk Assessment Questionnaire* to the Occupational Health Service (OHS) before the end of their first trimester, and outlining an appeals process for those who believed they had been categorised incorrectly. Pregnant staff without underlying conditions would return to school in September.

On 25 August, the three teacher unions issued a joint statement condemning the lack of provision of alternative time-bound working arrangements for pregnant teachers who had been ineligible to receive vaccines. The concerns of pregnant teachers and those teachers who were medically vulnerable were raised at every meeting the INTO conducted with DE officials and public health representatives.³¹ The INTO still holds the view that pregnant teachers ought not to have been forced to return to their schools before being fully vaccinated.

2.4 Teachers with underlying health conditions

The INTO regularly requested that the government review its risk categorisation criteria in line with emerging medical evidence in respect of teachers with underlying health conditions. In November, the INTO sought assurances that those in the very-high-risk health category and pregnant women would be prioritised for booster vaccines, and that following the provision of boosters to the elderly, vulnerable and front-line healthcare workers, all who work in crowded settings would receive booster vaccines as quickly as possible.

2.5 Supplementary programmes

The supplementary programme announced by the DE in March 2021 provided 20 hours of one-to-one, in-person support for vulnerable pupils who had returned to school on 1 March, and 30 hours for all other vulnerable pupils. Tuition was to be delivered outside of the normal school day (i.e. evenings and weekends), so that the pupils could continue to engage as fully as possible with the teaching and learning provided by their school.

On 8 September 2021, the DE published a €50m scheme called Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS), to provide additional funding to schools to hire part-time, qualified teachers to support pupils who had learning deficits as a result of COVID-19.

³⁰ [ASTI, INTO and TUI demand urgent meeting with government on teacher vaccination - INTO](#)

³¹ [Joint statement: Teacher unions condemn failure to protect staff in early pregnancy - INTO](#)

2.6 Public health risk-mitigation measures

2.61 Antigen testing

The COVID-19 rapid testing group recommended antigen testing on 1 April 2021. A pilot project on the use of rapid antigen diagnostic tests (RADT) in identifying COVID-19 in further and higher education settings and the early years (pre-school) sector began in July 2021, however, it was November when the DE set out how the new antigen testing scheme would operate in primary schools. The antigen testing system was extended to special education settings in January 2022. Public Health confirmed that the organisation of classroom pods was essential to ensure the success of the antigen-testing programme and that classroom pods should contain a maximum of six pupils.

2.62 Face coverings

In early March 2021, the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) reiterated its advice that a compulsory face mask policy for pupils was not recommended in primary schools. It remained the view of the INTO that such a policy for pupils in senior classes could help to reduce the risk of infection and provide an extra layer of defence against COVID-19. In September, the INTO called for an urgent review of the age restriction on the use of face coverings, and in November, the NPHET recommended the wearing of face masks for primary school children from 3rd to 6th classes.

The INTO secured an agreement on 4 January 2022 that FFP2 masks could be purchased by schools from current COVID-19 funding. The INTO encouraged members to wear medical-grade masks, and boards of management were asked to make these masks available to teachers.

The INTO provided support to several schools that were the focus of unwelcome protests by 'anti-maskers' who sought to intimidate school leaders and management in relation to their implementation of government guidelines about face-coverings for children, led by a campaign that spread widely on social media by the far right.

2.63 Ventilation

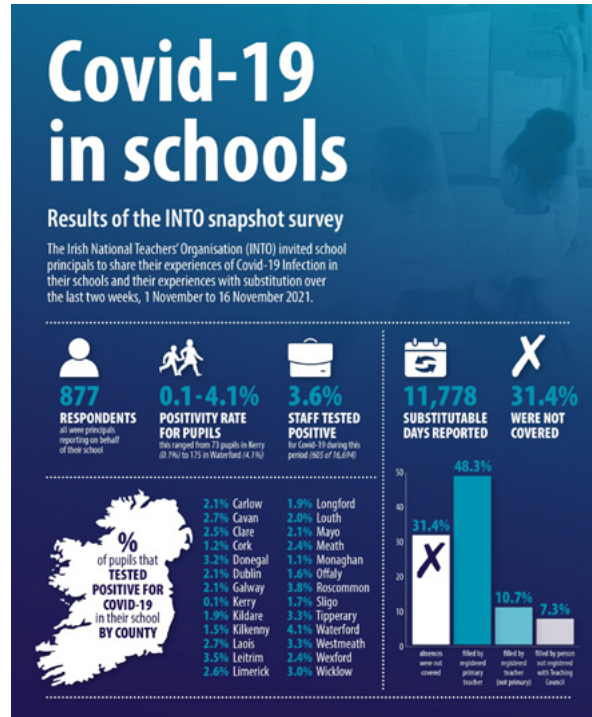
Understanding the airborne transmission of COVID-19 evolved gradually, leading to a strong emphasis on improving air circulation in schools. Public health officials advised schools to enhance ventilation by maximising outdoor airflow, conducting activities outside when possible, and following updated ventilation guidelines. Schools with inadequate ventilation were encouraged to apply for emergency works funding or use Minor Works Grants for smaller upgrades, with funding made available in December 2020.

Responding to calls from the INTO, the DE issued updated ventilation guidance in May, incorporating expert recommendations. This included the use of air quality monitors and ventilation standards for specific rooms, with CO₂ monitors to be distributed ahead of the new school year. The Department's Building and Planning Unit offered support for schools unable to provide adequate ventilation, either by supplying filtration systems or adapting physical infrastructure.

By September, the INTO expressed frustration over delays in delivering CO₂ monitors and reiterated concerns about school air quality. The Department assured full monitor distribution by 20 September and established a dedicated team to support schools. Technical assessments were offered where expert help was unavailable. Schools could use existing grants to address ventilation problems. However, many schools struggled with cold indoor temperatures during winter while trying to maintain airflow. In response, December saw a 50% increase in Minor Works Grants, and January 2022 brought further grants for window projects in selected schools.

2.64 Substitution crisis and rising infection rates

In November 2021, the union conducted a snapshot survey of 3,100 school principals across the country to assess the level of COVID-19 infection they were aware of in their school community and the extent of the substitution crisis. A total of 877 principals responded to the survey. The data submitted to the survey related to the period from 1 November 2021 to 16 November 2021.



The INTO used this data to put pressure on the DE in relation to the substitution crisis and the need for the continuation of mass testing, tracing, and risk assessments in schools. In November, children who attend primary schools were the cohort with the highest Infection levels in Ireland. Those working in primary schools were deeply concerned about the number of pupils and staff members who were unable to attend school due to COVID-19 and struggled to cope with the disruption this caused.

In December, following a sustained campaign by the INTO, the Government took steps to scale up public-health risk mitigation measures in schools, including the rollout of antigen testing and funding to address school ventilation. The Department of Education and Public Health were called on to enter into focused discussions with the INTO to discuss:

- ⌘ The swift reinstatement of public health support for primary schools from January 6.
- ⌘ The development of a widespread, high-quality public awareness campaign, designed to highlight the importance of adhering to all infection prevention and control measures to improve school safety.
- ⌘ the fast-tracking of the booster vaccine programme for all workers in crowded settings and ensuring that this programme was rolled out alongside the inoculation of children aged 5-11

On 4 January, the INTO, alongside other education unions and management, met with Minister Foley and officials from the DE and Public Health ahead of the planned reopening of schools on Thursday, 6 January. The union received commitments that designated public health staff nationwide would reengage with the sector, that a multi-lingual public awareness campaign would commence from the following day, student teachers would remain available to act in place of teachers until mid-term break and assurances were given that public health, occupational health and the DE would continue to monitor arrangements for pregnant staff and those with underlying health conditions.

Primary and special schools reopened on 6 January 2022. Over 2.6 million adults had received a vaccine booster, and the children's vaccination programme had begun.

3

MITIGATIONS AND SUPPORT

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the INTO consistently advocated for a comprehensive suite of public health measures and educational supports to ensure the safety and well-being of school communities, while also addressing the educational needs of pupils, particularly those most vulnerable to regression.

Central to the union's approach was the insistence that all mitigation strategies be grounded in public health advice and implemented fairly across primary and special schools. The INTO called for and secured a range of measures, including enhanced cleaning protocols, the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), and the installation of clear signage to support hygiene and social distancing. The union also demanded and achieved the suspension of inspections and non-essential initiatives to allow schools to focus on core teaching and safety responsibilities.

Recognising the importance of clear and consistent guidance, the INTO pressed for the publication of national protocols rather than leaving individual schools to develop their own. The union worked closely with the DE to shape the *COVID-19 School Response Plan*, which included detailed policies on infection control, classroom layouts, risk assessments, and procedures for managing suspected cases. The INTO also ensured that schools had access to training for cleaning staff and that child-friendly information campaigns were developed to help pupils understand new hygiene practices. Furthermore, the union ensured that schools received additional funding for enhanced cleaning and PPE.

As the pandemic evolved, the INTO continued to push for additional supports. The union played a key role in the establishment of teacher supply panels and the formation of school clusters to ensure adequate cover for staff absences and the establishment of clusters of schools served by fixed-term teachers to cover principals' release days. The INTO also supported the fast-tracking of teacher registration, both for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and those returning from overseas, to alleviate staffing pressures.

In response to the educational disruption caused by school closures, the INTO advocated for targeted interventions to support pupils at risk of regression. The union welcomed the expansion of the Summer Programme for children with SEN and those in DEIS schools and later supported the introduction of the Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS), which provided additional funding for schools to hire part-time teachers to assist pupils who had fallen behind.

The INTO also worked to protect vulnerable staff. The union secured remote working arrangements for teachers in high-risk health categories, including pregnant staff, and ensured that risk assessments were conducted and reviewed in line with evolving medical advice. The union's advocacy led to the provision of high-grade face masks for teachers delivering personal care and the prioritisation of special education staff in the vaccination rollout.

Ventilation and air quality became a growing concern as understanding of airborne transmission developed. The INTO successfully lobbied for the distribution of CO₂ monitors and updated ventilation guidance, and continued to press for the provision of air filtration systems and infrastructure upgrades where necessary. The union also supported the phased introduction of antigen testing in schools and called for a review of mask-wearing policies for senior primary pupils, which was eventually adopted.

In addition to these measures, the INTO demanded the provision of public health supports for schools, including testing and tracing, and the establishment of dedicated phone lines and school support teams to assist principals. The union also called for multilingual public awareness campaigns to ensure community-wide compliance with public health advice.

The union's efforts were not limited to health and safety. The INTO also worked to ensure that educational continuity was maintained. The union supported the development of curriculum guidance, wellbeing resources, and supplementary tuition programmes. It also defended schools and staff from external pressures, including protests against mask mandates and COVID-19 deniers, and consistently highlighted the professionalism and dedication of teachers and school leaders.

In summary, the INTO's approach to mitigation and support was holistic, evidence-based, and rooted in the lived experience of its members. This approach was underpinned by consultation with members through our democratic structures, which we maintained and developed throughout the pandemic. The union's advocacy ensured that schools were better equipped to navigate the challenges of the pandemic, while also safeguarding the rights and well-being of both pupils and staff.

3.1 Long COVID

In June 2022, the DE issued *Circular 0038/2022* in relation to special leave with pay, with changes to take effect from 1 July. Given the continued prevalence of COVID-19, in advance of the issuing of the circular, the INTO demanded that the terms for special leave with pay which applied before 7 February be reinstated by the DE. The DE stated that the measures contained in this revised circular were being applied across the public service. The INTO again urged the DE to issue guidance on risk mitigation measures and conducting risk assessments. The union also sought guidance on supporting teachers who were physically returning to the workplace after a prolonged period of absence. The union also submitted that reasonable accommodation, including a provision to work from home, be made available to teachers. The union strongly objected to the removal of expended special leave with pay for teachers suffering the effects of Long COVID.

In early July, the INTO became aware of discussions with healthcare unions in relation to extending special leave with pay for healthcare workers suffering from Long COVID. The union sought urgent engagement and discussion with the DE on this issue. The DE responded, stating that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) had standardised paid sick leave provisions across the public service and that any proposal for healthcare workers in relation to COVID-19 was a matter between the DPER and the HSE. The INTO raised this particular matter at the Teachers' Conciliation Council (TCC).

On 21 September 2023, the INTO engaged with the DE on the provision of a scheme for teachers suffering from symptoms of Long COVID. The INTO noted that a framework for extended leave for teachers with ongoing symptoms of an infectious disease was already in place, as up to 18 months of paid leave had previously been available for teachers suffering from tuberculosis.

The union also outlined the issues faced by members experiencing Long COVID and argued for the inclusion of a new category for Long COVID in the sick leave scheme. The DE stated that any changes would require a public sector-wide change and would have to be agreed upon by the DPENDPR. In that regard, they further stated that this was outside their remit.

The INTO has a firm view that the government's failure to provide additional supports for teachers who may have contracted Long COVID in the course of their employment was unfair to these teachers.

4

LESSONS LEARNED

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant vulnerabilities in the preparedness of the Irish education system to respond to large-scale public health emergencies. While the dedication and professionalism of school staff ensured that education continued under extraordinary circumstances, it is clear that systemic improvements are necessary to ensure a more resilient and coordinated response in the future.

A key lesson from this experience is the urgent need to establish robust crisis management structures specifically for the education sector, with particular emphasis on primary and special education. Such a structure must include formal representation from education unions, including the INTO, to ensure that the voices of those working on the front lines of education are heard and respected in real time. The absence of a dedicated, pre-established crisis response mechanism meant that many decisions during the pandemic were reactive, fragmented, and at times, lacking in clarity or consistency.

It is clear too that a legacy of underinvestment in primary and special education, including a failure to invest in primary school buildings in respect of ventilation, layout, modernisation/refit, undermined the ability of the sector to respond at key junctures throughout the pandemic. In light of this, serious attention should be taken to investing in the resilience of our school infrastructure, with ventilation remaining a major issue in many schools.

The experience of the pandemic demonstrated the vital importance of collaboration and social dialogue. Where unions, government departments, and school management bodies worked together, outcomes were more effective and better received. The INTO believes that this spirit of partnership must be formalised and strengthened, with regular, structured engagement between stakeholders as a standard feature of educational governance on all matters.

The INTO believes that a standing Education Crisis Management Group should be established, tasked with developing and maintaining a comprehensive contingency framework for future emergencies. This group should be empowered to model potential scenarios, including pandemics, natural disasters, or other disruptions to the delivery of education, with a view to producing a fit-for-purpose, actionable plan that can be activated swiftly when needed. Such a plan should address not only health and safety protocols, but also continuity of learning, support for vulnerable pupils, staff welfare, and communication strategies.

Despite repeated references in policy and political discourse to the importance of being prepared for seismic disruptions, the reality is that Ireland was caught off guard by the scale and speed of the COVID-19 crisis. Schools were left to interpret and implement guidance with at times inadequate support, and key decisions were often made without due consultation with those who would be responsible for their execution. This must not be repeated.

Another critical lesson is the importance of placing public health advice at the centre of all decision-making on planning for and managing pandemics. The INTO's consistent position throughout the pandemic was that the safety and well-being of pupils, staff and their families must be the primary consideration in any decisions affecting school operations. This principle must be embedded in future planning, with clear protocols for how public health guidance is to be interpreted and applied in educational settings.

The pandemic also underscored the need for greater investment in inclusive education, countering educational disadvantage, and in the provision of information and communication technology in schools. Pupils with SEN, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and children in DEIS schools were disproportionately affected by school closures and disruptions. Future planning must include targeted supports for these groups, including access to technology, tailored learning programmes, and mental health services.

Through engagement with our members, it has become clear that health and safety awareness in schools needs to be dramatically improved. Schools should receive rolling and regular access to health and safety training, which will ensure a higher level of knowledge of such matters in schools on an ongoing basis, but it will also serve to raise awareness levels should another major disruption to education take place along the lines of the last pandemic.

The legacy of Long COVID hangs over primary and special education workplaces much as it does elsewhere in society. Members have reported continuing symptoms in 2025, years after the pandemic was officially declared to have ended. The lack of engagement and support for workers with these symptoms throughout the pandemic or indeed after it had ended remains a stain on the state's response. Such workers should have access to specialised support services, as introduced in other countries such as the UK. Special arrangements should be put in place where such workers remain unable to return to work.

A further lesson, and one that must not be overlooked, is the need to confront misinformation and disinformation proactively. During the pandemic, the INTO and its members were subjected to targeted campaigns by far-right anti-vaccine and Covid-denial groups. These campaigns included protests outside union offices and school gates, which not only sought to intimidate school staff and school leaders but also undermined public health messaging. Such actions hindered the effectiveness of public awareness campaigns and created additional stress and confusion within school communities. Future crisis planning must include strategies to counter misinformation, protect school staff from harassment, and ensure that accurate, scientifically based information reaches all members of the school community.

Fórsa's 'Fairer and Stronger State' campaign calls for a more equal and resilient Ireland, with stronger public services, fairer taxation, and long-term investment in housing, healthcare, and climate action. It rejects the pre-pandemic model of privatisation and underinvestment, advocating instead for a proactive, publicly-led approach to national challenges. The INTO supported a motion backing this campaign at the 2025 Irish Congress of Trade Unions Biennial Delegate Conference, endorsing Fórsa's vision for a stronger role for the State in securing social and economic wellbeing.³²

Finally, the long-term effects of social isolation, changes to family life and the impact on people's personal lives and aspirations are yet to be measured. Longitudinal studies such as *Growing Up in Ireland* must continue to explore the effects of two years of crisis on the entire population.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic was a defining moment for Irish education. It revealed both the strengths of the system, particularly the commitment of its teachers and school leaders, and the areas in which it must improve. The INTO urges the Inquiry to ensure that these lessons are not only acknowledged but acted upon, so that the education system is better prepared, more heavily resourced, and more resilient in the face of future challenges.

³² [Pandemic lessons must shape a fairer and stronger State - Fórsa](#)

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