

JULY 2020

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY OF STUDENTS, PARENTS AND GUARDIANS - REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

Prepared by the Irish Second Level Students Union (ISSU) and the
National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP)



ABOUT THE SURVEY

Founded in 2008, the Irish Second-Level Students Union (ISSU) is the national representative body for school students in the Republic of Ireland. The ISSU is led by students, for students. The main aims of the ISSU are:

- To provide support, training and assistance to second-level student councils.
- To develop policies on issues affecting Irish second-level students and bring the needs and rights of students to the attention of the relevant authorities.
- To provide a transparent, democratic and reliable organisation.
- To work in collaboration with other educational institutions and bodies both in Ireland, and Europe.
- To work closely with educational partners to continually develop a transparent, fair and modern education system.
- To give students a structured platform through which the voices of the Irish Second-level students will be heard.

The National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP) is the national representative body for parents and guardians of young people in post-primary education in Ireland. Inaugurated in 1985, the organisation assists parents and guardians, ensuring that they engage effectively within their school communities and with partners in education.

In order to ascertain the views and opinions on the reopening of post-primary schools in Ireland, the ISSU and the NPCPP launched a survey in June 2020, targeting students, parents and guardians. The survey ran from 27th June 2020 until 1st July 2020.

Provisional information on the results of this survey were shared online in July 2020, including the following infographic and Twitter cards.

The following report contains the results of this survey.

DEMOGRAPHICS

This survey was distributed broadly to capture as much information as possible. This included sending notifications to all post-primary schools in Ireland, Parents Associations affiliated to the NPCPP and post-primary students in Ireland on a national basis.

Additionally, the survey was disseminated using online mailing list services, and through the use of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Extensive efforts were undertaken to reach all parents, guardians and students with this report highlighting some of the experiences and opinions of those who responded.

There were 11,615 responses and after duplicates were removed the final number of responses used for analysis was 11,506.

46%

46% of the responses received were from students, or the parents and guardians of students, entering 1st, 2nd or 3rd year in September 2020.

54%

54% of the responses received were from students, or the parents and guardians of students, entering 4th/Transition Year, 5th or 6th year in September 2020.

GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

The largest proportion of respondents were from Dublin (22%), followed by Meath (15%) and Cork (13%).

Responses were received from all counties, with the lowest number of responses received from Leitrim, Longford, Monaghan and Roscommon.



THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19

The section of the survey aimed to assess the impact that COVID-19 has had on students, parents and guardians across Ireland.

In a previous survey run by the NPCPP in 2020, it was found that the experience of remote learning/home schooling from the perspective of parents, guardians and students was varied and disparate.

This survey on the reopening of schools also found evidence that the engagement between the school and the student varied from household to household.

Respondents were asked to rate the quality of education during lock down, with 11,406 responses received.

55% rated the quality of education at fair to good, 15% noting that the education they received during the pandemic was poor, with 9% indicating that the level of education was excellent.

Additionally, this survey sought to uncover whether COVID-19 had negatively impacted the mental health and wellbeing of students at post-primary level. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in relation to COVID-19 "negative mental health effects of the pandemic appear to be greater among younger people".¹



75%

A total of 75% of respondents to this survey indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on their, or their students' mental health. The largest percentage of respondents indicated that COVID-19 had a mild impact (45%), with a further 23% indicating that there were moderate impacts on mental health. 7% of the respondents indicated that COVID-19 had a severe impact on student's mental health.

¹ Flanney, W (2020) *Letter from President to Major Political Party Leaders Re: Mental Health Services and the Next Programme for Government in Light of Covid-19*, College of Psychiatrists Ireland [online] available: <https://www.irishpsychiatry.ie/blog/letter-from-president-to-major-political-party-leaders-re-mental-health-services-and-the-next-programme-for-government-in-light-of-covid-19/>

REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

Respondents were asked to rank the additional facilities and supports which they felt were needed to allow for the reopening of schools and the return of students to school buildings.



24%

Induction and health and safety training days



21%

COVID-19 Liaison within the school

TOP PRIORITIES FOR REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

Induction and health and safety training days (24%), Health and Hygiene support led by a COVID-19 Liaison within the school (21%), and changes in coursework to be covered by students (16%), were ranked the highest in priority with regards to additional supports/facilities required on reopening of schools.



16%

Changes in coursework to be covered by students

"Pupils having anxiety about the possibility of contracting Coronavirus in school"

CONCERNS REGARDING REOPENING

Academic Concerns

Over 51% of respondents noted concerns regarding academic issues and over 5,000 comments were received.

Nearly half of the comments were referring to the curriculum. In particular, most respondents were concerned about having to 'catch-up' on content covered during the lockdown.

Other issues related to online learning, with many feeling that the quality of learning done during this time was not comparable to in-class learning, due to variations in the quality of teaching, a lack of facilities, and also a lack of motivation.

1/5 of the comments related to concerns regarding Classroom Based Assessments (Junior Cycle), practical experiences and project work.

Many expressed a need for face to face instruction, noting that it is an essential element of education which is not possible through online learning.

Other areas of concern included the transition into post-primary from primary education settings, and there were also concerns relating to Transition year and prospective students.

"I have fallen behind massively due to COVID-19 and I worry that I may struggle with finishing coursework on time as well as properly being able to understand the coursework."

Physical Health Concerns

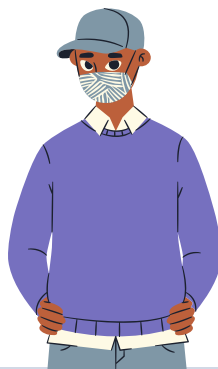
"If we are to go back to school with social distancing measures, what programmes will be put in place for both students and teachers with weakened immune systems who would be unable to return even with social distancing?"

"My school is an old convent. We don't stand any chance of practicing social distancing because all of the classrooms hallways are too narrow. There are a lot of schools in this position; schools where it is completely undeniable to practice social distancing."

29% of respondents had concerns about physical health and the reopening of post-primary schools.

These concerned the ability of schools to maintain the social distancing standards imposed (25%), monitoring the implementation of hand hygiene, the provision of physical activity (19%), and further outbreaks of COVID-19 or spreading of the virus to vulnerable family members outside of the school environment.

Many were also concerned about the procedures being introduced with regards to students falling ill and presenting to school regardless. This latter was of greater concern to those who had an underlying condition and centred around missing more schooling due to this.



Mental Health Concerns

18% of the total comments highlighted the social aspects of school which are vital to ongoing personal development.

A further 18% mentioned stress, with an additional 18% noting issues relating to social anxiety and social isolation.

Overall it can be deduced that students throughout the post-primary sector are concerned, stressed and anxious about catching up on missed course work. In particular the exam year students have expressed stress and anxiousness about the amount they have missed for a variety of reasons.

Many expressed concern that what they had studied during COVID-19 was not learned to the same level as it would have been in school, and they feel they will need time to revise these elements.

Many stated they were concerned about the lack of knowledge regarding the new environment they might be entering into and about changes to curriculum.

"Mental Health supports must be THE fundamental pillar to transitioning students back to education."



662

662 comments were received regarding stress, of which 62% were contributed by student respondents.

There were 353 comments relating to anxiety, of which 70% were made by parents or guardians.

Comments specifying the need for additional mental health resources featured 327 times, of which 70% were made by parents or guardians.

Social Aspects and Concerns

Overall there were 1600 comments in this section. 41% related to social distancing and how this will impact the school routine, the ability of all to make new friends, maintain friendships and how this may lead to some students being isolated or bullied.

13% expressed concern about the readjustment to school due to the social isolation experienced during lockdown and lack of formal routine.

13% also expressed concern regarding the implementation of health and safety regulations and the schools implementation of these.

Many parents and guardians are concerned about the ability of schools to implement all the health and safety guidelines needed to ensure their students stay safe and healthy. In particular they are concerned about the schools ability to monitor the social distancing regulations without making the students afraid to socialise.

"I know school will do their utmost to have environment safe for all but would worry that everyone might not be compliant."

"Socially anxious child, very happy to be home and dreading return to school. Will there be adequate supports in place?"

"For child starting in 1st year coming from a small school, social distancing will make it hard to make friends."

Financial Concerns

17% of participants stated that they had financial concerns on the reopening of schools due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

83% of respondents noted they had no financial concerns regarding the reopening of schools.

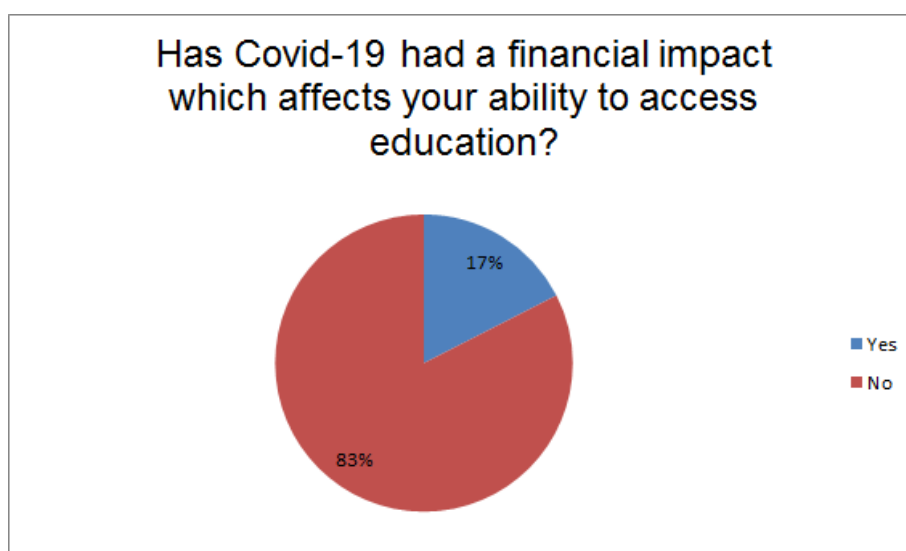
Out of 1,025 additional comments from parents, guardians and students, 718 (70.04%) of those comments referred to a worry that a parent or guardian in the household had been/is out of work due to the economic difficulties faced during COVID-19 restrictions.

Due to the loss of work, worries were noted about the financial difficulties faced in being able to cover basic school costs.

Concerns were expressed around payments for school materials (uniforms, stationary and books), school transport and school contribution fees.

Fears were communicated around school fees rising to cover costs for the essential equipment that will be needed based on current health and safety recommendations.

"...We are concerned about not being able to afford books, supplies, uniforms and our children's return to activities."



Concerns Relating to Transitioning back to School

24.08% of respondents raised concerns around transitioning back to school in September 2020 and the lack of guidance provided to date, specifically for incoming first year students.

Participants commented that an induction programme for adjusting back to school and socialising in a safe school environment would be imperative in students transitioning back to education.

Specific concerns were highlighted in responses regarding the academic demands that will be placed on all examination years transitioning back to school. Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Applied and Junior Cycle students are noted to be at a distinct disadvantage due to the considerable amount of in class time missed.

Participants suggested adjustments to the curriculum of each subject should be made after missing so much class time and missing out on valuable elements of their syllabus. The significant recurrence of comments on the adjustment to subject curriculum showcases that students and parents/guardians feel strongly that changes must be made to accommodate the work missed.

"Our children have a constitutional right to an education."

Furthermore, concerns were raised about the transition to Transition Year as the previous programme at this moment in time cannot be implemented based on current health and safety guidelines. Clarification and communication as to what the programme will look like in the year 2020/2021 was noted as essential from respondents.

Concerns around the impact of course deferral and added competition for places in 2021 was also highlighted in a number of responses. Due to the current grading system implemented for the Leaving Certificate class of 2020 students have the option of deferral of course places to September 2021.

There may be an increase in such deferrals due to change in course offers after appeals and/or sitting of examinations, personal concerns of transitioning to third level or financial difficulties. This is suggested as causing increased concern for incoming examination students in returning to school.

REOPENING CONCERNS

Concerns and Considerations Relating to Hygiene and COVID-19

Both populations noted the need for strict guidelines on health and safety as a necessity to be collaboratively implemented in schools.

Responses also included concerns around the current social distance requirements and the inability for this to be implemented in schools due to lack of space in classrooms, corridors, at lockers and common areas.

Respondents also noted the need for specific contingency plans should a case be detected in the school and if a student or staff member is required to stay at home due to illness how will they be accommodated.

"Big worry regarding space/ventilation in school whether classroom or common area. As far as I'm aware no hot water in school currently. Whatever happens in Sept [sic] space to social distance needs to be discussed for staff and students."

MOST COMMON CONCERNS

69.54%

Hand sanitiser availability within school environments

61.23%

Accessible hand washing facilities for students during the school day

57.30%

Sufficient common areas, which allow for social distancing within school hours

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations stemming from the results of the ISSU/NPCPP joint survey:

1

A programme for reopening of post-primary schools should be developed in collaboration with the whole school community and external providers of health service (NEPS, CAMHS, etc).

2

Representative body advocates for students, parents and guardians should be consulted on government policies relating to the reopening of schools, to ensure that resources are accessible to targeted populations and encompass different circumstances and perspectives.

3

Schools should be prompted to communicate effectively and efficiently with students, parents and guardians, on the policies and procedures of relevance to reopening of schools to mitigate the risk that policies will not be understood, and to maximise compliance.

4

Immediate reviews of syllabi and examination methods for all subjects at both Junior and Senior Cycle should take place to allow for adaptations in the coming academic years. Resources should be funded which complement education within school settings, including study skill sessions and supplementary supports for projects and practicals.

5

Additional learning programmes and social supports to address learning loss, especially for vulnerable or at-risk students and those with special educational needs, should be implemented. These should include appropriate resources, including access to guidance counsellor support, for those of whom a return to a school environment may not be feasible, to avoid further marginalisation of at-risk students.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS CONTD...

6

Students undergoing a transition from primary to post-primary, and from post-primary to further or higher education, should have access to information and support services within the school community to minimise negative impacts associated with change. This should include engagement with parents, guardians and other support systems

7

An actionable programme for the 2020/2021 Transition Year group should be developed and communicated promptly, ensuring that these students are not left behind and have access, in a feasible capacity, to the learning, skills and experiences their peers have been afforded in past Transition Year programmes.

8

Additional resources and support should be made available for students within school settings to support mental health and wellbeing, including allocated time with guidance counsellors and teachers, and support on a 1 to 1 basis. The 1998 Education Act states that a recognised school shall “ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices”. One-to-one student work has been slashed from 12 hours pre-Budget 2012 to 4.9 hours per week currently. Reinstating full hours for guidance counsellors, as per circular PPT 12/05, would increase the capacity of schools to cater to the mental health needs of the school community.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS CONTD...

9

A “back to school” transitional wellbeing programme should be developed to support students returning to education. Students, parents and guardians have consistently highlighted an increase in mental health related issues throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and a return to education may exacerbate some existing social, physical or mental health issues for some students.

10

The Department of Education and Skills should seek to instate Designated COVID-19 Liaisons within each school to act as focal points for information relating to COVID-19. Their role would include oversight of student and teacher wellbeing, ensuring that all required resources and materials are in place, developing contingency plans and strengthening of remote learning practices in the event of future school closures, and communicating concerns regarding COVID-19 to relevant health agencies.

11

Due to the recent announcement on the delay of issuing the Leaving Certificate 2020 results, the Department of Education and Skills should clarify the intentions to reopen schools in line with the academic calendar. This delay will inevitably impact the capabilities of schools and guidance counsellors to provide appropriate support to young people during this stressful period, and potentially have consequential impacts which will permeate all aspects of school life.

CONCLUSIONS

As a nation we now face the reality of living with COVID-19; ensuring that our children and young people have access to education is paramount to enabling a resumption of everyday life for over 370,000 post-primary students. It is also essential if we are to ensure that their futures do not suffer as a result of this pandemic.

Acknowledging the impact COVID-19 will have on the health, wellbeing and academic progression of students in post-primary education, a consortium to seek clarification on policies and protocols to be put in place to ensure effective reopening of post-primary schools was formed. This consortium consists of the Irish Second-Level Students Union (ISSU), the National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP), UNICEF Ireland and the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC).

This report of the survey of over 11,000 students, parents and guardians, under the auspices of the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) and the National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP), will be utilised to further advise the working of the consortium.

The consortium seeks confirmation from the Government on the resources which will be provided to post-primary schools to facilitate a return to education, following the COVID-19 pandemic.

