



Ms Norma Foley TD
Minister for Education
Department of Education and Skills
Marlborough Street
Dublin D01 RC96

7th January 2020

Dear Minister Foley,

Government decision to reopen Special Schools and Special Classes during Level 5 Public Health Restrictions

I am writing to you to express our concerns at the decision announced yesterday to reopen all Special Schools and Special classes on 11th January at the height of the Covid 19 Pandemic.

Fórsa supports the continuation of educational provision for students with additional care needs , indeed we were critical of the lack of consideration given to Special Education at the commencement of the last School closures in March last year.

Fórsa suggested that consideration needed to be given to this issue if Schools were to close during the Level 5 Public Health restrictions. What we did not anticipate was a decision by Government to attempt to reopen all Special Schools and Special classes in the normal manner from 11th January next without due consideration of the operational and safety issues arising.

It is not clear to us that this decision is based on specific public health advice from NPHET or the CMO. If the Government has indeed obtained specific advice on this policy we request full disclosure of the same.

As you know our SNA members are extremely concerned that they are now expected to work as per normal in the absence of childcare. There has been no discussion what so ever on this critical issue. The feedback we have received clearly indicates that SNAs with school age children and no available childcare will have to prioritise the needs of their own families and will not be able to attend work if this means leaving children without care or supervision. We would point out that the general guidance for public service employers on dealing with the challenges of Covid-19 requires home working to be utilised wherever possible when staff cannot access childcare during the pandemic. There has been no discussion on this issue and no guidance issued to Boards of Management.

We understand that the Government believes that Schools are a safe environment and has reached this decision on the basis of the adoption of specific mitigation measures such as the use of social distancing, use of face masks and enhanced hygiene measures. As anyone who has visited a Special School and witnessed the nature of the excellent service provision will know, it is impossible to practice social distancing in those environments. Students cannot wear masks and are not able to practice hand or respiratory hygiene. In short the mitigation measures which may be effective in a mainstream class have not been implemented in Special Schools as it would be impractical to do so.

The mitigation measures in respect of SEN School Transport are equally ineffective. Students and staff spend hours at a time travelling in cramped conditions, students cannot wear masks, there is no social distancing and it is impossible to maintain hygiene standards. Transports often cover several Counties with the same vehicle, we fail to see how these arrangements are in any way compliant with minimum health and safety standards.

We have today issued correspondence to Boards of Management who are the legal employers of SNAs asking for urgent confirmation that they will guarantee to provide a safe working environment for our members on 11th January next in areas such as effective social distancing and that they will allow staff unable to attend the workplace due to childcare deficits to work remotely. The responses we receive will indicate the extent to which those employers are able to facilitate reopening in a safe manner.

As things stand it is clear to us that implementation of this policy is now at significant risk. Many thousands of staff will be unable to attend work on Monday 11th January due to childcare problems and genuine concerns as to the ability of their employer to provide a safe working environment as required in legislation.

We suggest that implementation of the policy is paused to allow for urgent discussions to take place on a model of service provision for SEN students that can be delivered safely. In our view it would be unwise to proceed as planned without detailed discussions with stakeholders on how the needs of students can be addressed in a safe and sustainable manner.

Yours Sincerely,

Andy Pike
National Secretary
Fórsa Trade Union

Nerney's Court, Dublin D01- R2C5

t +353 1 817 1500 e info@forsa.ie www.forsa.ie