



RE: Re-opening of Coláiste De Lacy

13th August 2020

Dear Parent/Guardian and Staff Member,

I hope you and your families are keeping well. I am writing today to provide *some* information about the plans that we are busy making for the return of students and staff. These plans are guided by a huge number of documents/guidelines which are continually being published/revised by the DES (Department of Education & Skills) such as *The Covid-19 Response Plan* and *Reopening Our Schools – The Roadmap for the Full Return to School*. Like many of my colleagues in school leadership and as a parent, I share a sense of frustration regarding the lateness of these guidelines/documents/grants. However, I want to assure all parents/guardians, students and staff that plans and preparations are advancing well for reopening Coláiste De Lacy.

Of course, we also have the added challenge of the remediation works and restoring the school building to its previous state, in addition to considering Covid-19 protocols, policies and procedures. As you are aware, our school has been part of a massive DES building remediation project since October 2018. Last summer (2019) we completely moved out of the school building and the exterior walls were remediated. This summer (2020), we vacated the building again but the contractors got a slight head start on the works when they were allowed to resume work from 18th May 2020. This Phase of the works focused on many of the interior walls and services. While various *Phases* of work will continue for the foreseeable future, I am happy to report that we got back into the building last week and snagging is currently taking place.

We are now planning and hoping to re-open our school safely, in line with current guidance and recommendations. The interim public health advice provided by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), and the practical application of this advice within schools as reflected in the guidance developed by the Department of Education, is predicated on:

- Minimising risk of introduction of infection into the school (through exclusion of pupils, staff members and visitors who are ill)
- Managing risk of spread if introduced by the following: regular hand hygiene; maintaining physical distancing; application of respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette; and environmental hygiene.

The public health advice makes clear that: *“the most critical part of managing the risks of COVID-19 related to schools is doing everything practical to avoid introduction of COVID-19 into the school. If the infection is not introduced it cannot spread”*.

In terms of maintaining physical distancing, measures fall into two broad categories:

1. Increasing separation; 2 metre if possible, otherwise 1 metre with face coverings
2. Decreasing interaction between students themselves, between students and staff and between staff when they are together.

The public health advice states that: *“the principle of distancing can be usefully applied in the school setting, allowing for some flexibility when needed whilst noting that it must be applied in a practical way, recognising that the learning environment cannot be dominated by a potentially counterproductive focus on this issue”*. There are very few schools in the country, if any, who could provide a 2-meter distance between students.

Indeed, there are many schools in the country, who are currently scrambling to acquire temporary accommodation, rent local facilities...etc. as they were already overcrowded prior to Covid-19. Thankfully, all but one of our classrooms are well in excess of the standard classroom size (49m²). Therefore, we will be able to increase separation to a good degree. Other changes that we will implement include:

- **Students and staff must stay at home if they feel unwell or have any of the symptoms of Covid-19 or if they have been abroad in the last 14 days!**
- Reconfiguration of class spaces and indeed all available space in the school to maximise physical distancing
- Base classes will be located in classrooms and teachers will move between classes
- Zoning of the school building according to year group, e.g. all of the five first year classrooms will be housed on the same corridor and will use the same stairs
- Seating arrangements will be decided by Year Heads to minimise interaction (within base classes and between classes in options/levels)
- Staggered breaks (two per day, probably of 15 minutes duration each.....like we had at the start of last year) for each year group
- A one-way system will operate in the prefabs and in the main building
- The school has established *isolation areas* (one main and one overflow) in case students/staff present with any symptoms/illness throughout the school day
- A massive order has been placed for signage, PPE, hand sanitiser, sanitising stations...etc. in accordance with the governments framework which was published on Monday (10/08/20)all schools have to use the nominated suppliers so we are hopeful that we will receive delivery next week
- All students and staff will wear face coverings (masks) each day as it will not be possible to ensure a 2-meter distance at all times
- Students and staff should bring their own face mask (unless exempt), wipes and small bottle of hand sanitiser. The school will have a backup of supplies but it will not be possible to provide masks for every single student each day
- Students and staff will sanitise their work areas (desks and chairs) upon arrival and departure from a different classroom
- Hand sanitisation will take place routinely at the start and end of each lessons. Hand sanitising stations will be placed in each room and along corridors
- All lockers have been cleared, cleaned and relocated. The contents of all lockers have been packaged will be returned to students who did not clear them once school is up and running. All locks will be sanitised before distribution to students
- Brand new textbooks have been ordered and covered for all first and fifth year students (which will be disseminated soon to all students who have paid their school book rental). There is no obligation on parents/guardians to participate in book rental and book lists can be provided if requested
- Students should not arrive at school before 08:15 am each day. Students should proceed to their allocated room upon arrival of school each day. Doors of classrooms will be left open. Supervision will be provided in each year group zone from 08:15 to Clann Time
- Staff will work in Pods (mini-staffrooms located around the building) to minimise interaction during planning periods and break times. The existing staffroom will also be a Pod for a small team of teachers but other staff will not have general access to it
- All students will receive training in preventing Covid-19 and also in the use of Office 365 (email, MS Teams, One Note...etc.) in case of school closures
- A *Return To Work Protocol*, and online Covid-19 induction training is currently being developed by the DES which staff will have to complete before the school reopens. LMETB (the employer) already have their own *Return to Work Protocol* in place for staff who are back working the building already
- A *Covid-19 Response Team* (staff) is already in place since school closure and two staff *Lead Worker Representatives* will be selected soon (further correspondence for staff will follow)
- A number of school policies are currently being considered/reviewed in light of Covid-19 such as the *Code Of Conduct, Health & Safety Statement, Child Safeguarding Statement...etc.*

- A *Covid-19 Policy* is currently being developed (based on the DES template). This will be published on the school website before school reopens
- All access to the school (except for students & staff) must be pre-approved by the Principal. A *Request for Access* online form has been developed for any visitor/parent/contractor looking to access the school building for any reason. This is necessary to restrict and monitor access for contact tracing. Where possible, phone calls and online meetings should take place
- Enhanced cleaning regimes, especially for surfaces that are frequently touched
- A meeting has taken place with the canteen provider regarding staggered breaks and the *possibility* of introducing a cashless service (further information will be provided once known)
- Resources have been collated for SPHE lessons to facilitate the transition of students back into school
- The school is currently looking at how *Medication Meetings* can take place safely but will be in touch with relevant parents/guardians soon
- An *Induction Schedule* for all students is currently being planned. This needs to be timed and planned carefully. Further information will be available next week once a delivery date for the PPE, Signage, Sanitising stations, soap, cleaning products...etc. is confirmed
- **Parents/guardians will not be able to drop forgotten items (iPads, lunches, water bottles...etc.) into the school under any circumstances.** Please reassure students that it is not the end of the world if they forget something!
- The answering of phones in the school office may not always be possible if a number of students/staff present with Covid-19 symptoms or illness. The school admin staff will prioritise the following of protocols for students/staff who present with symptoms and this will necessitate that they will have to attend the isolation areas at times. Therefore, it may not be possible to answer phones at all times. Parental understanding and co-operation will be imperative. All students must have an Emergency Contact on their file in case a parent/guardian is not contactable
- Staff are not allowed to enter the main reception office. All staff should present at the hatch (internal) instead
- All student appointments (dental, medical, wellbeing...etc.) should be arranged for after school, where possible. Parents/guardians should not present at the school to sign a student out/in for appointments. If an appointment is really important and cannot be scheduled for outside of school time, then the student should stay at home on that day. **Only parents/guardians who have been contacted by the office to collect a student who is not feeling well are allowed to call to the school to minimise the risk to all.**
- Students are encouraged to bring their own lunch and drink each day in order to decrease interaction but where students do use the canteen, a strict queuing system will be in place

The above list is not exhaustive and many further changes may need to be made. For example;

- It is highly likely that there will be a massive reduction in the amount of extra-curricular activities and off-site visits
- The school is currently looking at the *possibility* of installing hand dryers in the toilets. If this is not possible then disposable towels will be used instead of the existing roller-towels
- The TY Coordinator is currently reviewing plans and looking at alternative options for TY 2020-2021. Further information will be provided to students after commencement
- It is also unclear how practical lessons will take place safely and equipment will be sanitised before use by the next group of students
- While the government have announced additional allocations for teachers at post-primary, their figures equate to approximately one teacher per school. Even if they allocated an additional ten teachers per school, there is a national shortage of teachers in Ireland for the past few years, especially in languages, Mathematics and Science. We foresee that the recruitment of additional part-time teachers will be the main challenge for our school.

Another important point of information for parents/guardians and staff is that the HSE has responsibility for informing close contacts of those who test positive for Covid-19: *"The HSE will inform any staff/parents who have come into close contact with a diagnosed case via the contact tracing process. The HSE will contact all*

relevant persons where a diagnosis of Covid-19 is made. The instructions of the HSE should be followed and staff and student confidentiality is essential at all times". The role of the school in communicating with parents/guardians and staff regarding a positive case of Covid-19 in the school is very unclear but will definitely be limited by GDPR.

While the *COVID-19 Response Plan, Reopening Our Schools – The Roadmap for the Full Return to School* and other the documentation from the DES are voluminous, they lack much clarity/detail on many practical issues (as outlined above). Therefore, I will continue to communicate with you to provide further information as it becomes available over the next week or two. While there is much that we still *do not know*, we felt that it was best to tell you what *we do know* so that parents/guardians can make informed decisions for their individual son/daughter. We are still hopeful that first year students will commence on Thursday 27th August 2020 and Friday 28th August 2020. We will be in touch next week to confirm this and also regarding specific times and dates for the return of all other year groups. We will continue to upload information onto our school website and Twitter.

Re-opening the school safely will require the co-operation of all members of our whole school community; students, staff, parents/guardians, community groups. We will all be called on to play our part in ensuring that re-opening of the school is done in a safe manner which prevents the spread of the virus and allows the vital work of teaching and learning to proceed with as little disruption as possible.

We are really looking forward to welcoming our students and staff back to school and will be doing all that we can to ensure that the return to school is a safe and enjoyable experience for them.

Thanking you in advance for your cooperation and understanding.
Stay safe.

Kind regards,
Janice Uí Bheoláin (Principal)