

Advisory report regarding measures to overcome consequences of the coronavirus pandemic for education

16 April 2020

The Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and Media has solicited advice from the Education Council on how the pandemic's consequences for education can be overcome. This first advisory report addresses short-term consequences of the lockdown for primary and secondary education.

The education system experiences unprecedented times. The Education Council stresses the need to focus attention on acute issues and to acknowledge that all else is of later concern. The Council also states the importance of having realistic expectations of schools; especially since schools already suffered from severe workloads and staff shortages before the pandemic and now face further challenges as staff gets ill or is under increased stress. Primary attention during the school lockdown should be directed towards shelter and care for children and youths in unstable or unsafe home environments. In addition, it is important to support schools in order to enable them to do what is called for and to prepare for an 'intelligent' re-opening; by providing scope for schools, offering clarity on measures and facilitating them. Schools can probably compensate learning deficits within regular school times and contexts once pupils are allowed back in school. The Council also recommends to initiate research to monitor the effects of measures and interventions.

Specific recommendations are:

- **Shelter and support for children and youths in unstable or unsafe home environments**
The Council emphasizes the significance of proper attention to children and youths in vulnerable positions, especially those living in unstable or unsafe home environments. Municipalities and schools should stay in contact with those pupils; if necessary providing day-care shelter in schools or elsewhere. The government should make it absolutely clear that those pupils are covered by the same exception as children of parents in crucial professions (e.g. nurses) and address municipalities and school boards that fail to care for them. Schools could be supported to provide for these children by deploying professionals that are inactive due to the lockdown (e.g. educational staff of museums). Should the lockdown exceed the duration of a few weeks, special activities will have to be organized for these pupils, embedded in extended school days or summer programmes. The Council envisions rich programmes that include sports and cultural activities.
- **Preparing for the time pupils return to school: 'intelligent' re-opening**
Re-opening schools will not be a matter of simply continuing lessons where one left off. It calls for deliberate preparations and well thought out transitions from distance learning to teaching in school or blended forms of learning. Lessons can be learned from countries that have re-opened already, as well as from existing experiences with distance and blended learning (e.g. in mobile schools for children of fairground entertainers or inland skippers). The Council stresses that measures should not focus completely on learning outcomes, but also on the pupils' social and emotional development. Attention should be paid to the social and emotional impact the lockdown has on them. And schools should investigate whether pupils have developed learning deficits throughout the school lockdown. The Council observes that it is very likely that many children will not have covered or processed all subject matters in the way they should have. However, huge variation between pupils is to be expected – some may even have done better and deem distance learning a positive experience –; e.g. due to differences in learning styles, due to social and financial factors or parents' capabilities to offer their children support with school work, or due to differences between pupils who are capable of working on their own and pupils in greater need of frequent and clear direction. The consequences of the lockdown are also likely to vary between types of education, depending on the extent to which teaching and activities can be adapted to distance learning. In some types of education or courses that is harder than in others (e.g. early childhood education or VET). The longer the duration of the lockdown turns out to be, the greater differences between pupils will be. If the lockdown (i.e. the period in which pupils learn at home, directed by their

school/teachers from a distance) does not exceed the duration of a few weeks, deficits will be limited, in general. Schools and pupils will probably be able to catch up deficits quickly, within the next academic year(s). Schools can be trusted to manage this situation, although some support would be welcome and the government should monitor what schools do in order to learn about what measures can be effective. If the lockdown lasts for several months, additional measures are in order. One measure to consider in this scenario would be to move the summer break forward or to lift the obligation on schools to fully close during the summer break.

Special attention would be needed to pupils making the transition to secondary or higher education. Due to the lockdown, the test at the end of primary school that offers objective information for admission to schools in secondary education, has not been administered. The same goes for central examinations at the end of secondary school. The schools or universities where pupils continue their education, should reckon with the possibility that this has caused selection errors.

- **Sharing information, experiences, and good practices**

The Council recommends to establish a national information and support node. That should be a central place to collect and disseminate information on education during and in the wake of this pandemic. To this information point a help desk should be attached to offer schools customized support (in combination with special subsidies). The Council also recommends to initiate research to monitor consequences and the effectiveness of measures.

