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Opinion: When it comes to schools re-opening, why is no one talking about Switzerland?

Liam Printer

7-9 minutes

SO, THE NEW government in Ireland has announced its plans for the reopening of schools. Over the coming days and weeks, there will be much discussion from all involved in the debate about the merits or otherwise of the plans.

Teachers, parents, unions, politicians and of course the students – everyone with a vested interest will understandably be pushing their points.

I teach in a secondary school in Switzerland and here, all schools have been back teaching in our real classrooms since 11 May. Yes, with real, live people around who exist as more than just avatars or thumbnails.

This is despite Switzerland having a direct land border with Northern Italy, which was the initial epicentre of the Covid-19 outbreak in Europe.

Does it feel different being back in class? Yes, absolutely, but it has to. The world is different. Life is different. Schools have to adjust. The Swiss federal government decided that the country was ready for students up to the age of 16 (equivalent to the end of Transition Year in Ireland) to return to school from 11 May, but

with restrictions.

School, with limits

As things stood initially, only half the class could be present each day to allow for more spacing inside the buildings. A few weeks later, these restrictions were removed.

Since the end of May, students up to age 16 have been in full, normal classes while the older students – the 5th and 6th years – have been coming in on alternate days in a hybrid form of learning, a combination of online and live classroom teaching.

A little to all of our surprise, while we were back at school, there was no reported increase in Covid-19 cases in Switzerland. In fact, the numbers decreased. This phenomenon has also been demonstrated in Denmark, Germany and Austria.

In Switzerland, it wasn't until the borders reopened that the numbers began to increase again. So why is there no mention of Switzerland in general conversations about schools re-opening?

I work at a school with fantastic leadership where no stone was left unturned regarding preparations for us returning to campus.

Seating in classrooms is spaced out, there are floor markings around teachers' desks, hand sanitisers in every classroom, one-way traffic in the cafeteria and staggered class end times for younger students.

Masks are available for those who want them, and some entertaining instructional videos were provided to students before they came back – using teddy bears to demonstrate social distancing.

Vulnerable staff members were given some leeway and could continue to work from home if they wished. Although this created

an inevitable strain on other teachers who were sometimes needed to cover their classes, an interesting shift occurred; once those teachers working from home noticed that the Covid-19 case numbers were not increasing, they returned to teach in the classrooms.

The students understand the need to change their social behaviours but – and it is a big but – they are children. As soon as they are out of class, they are of course getting within a metre of each other. This is unavoidable.

The official guidance from the Swiss government is that children do not need to socially distance the way adults do but that wherever possible we should use the best judgement to avoid them being in groups. So that is what we are doing.

The positives

My overwhelming feeling is of appreciation and gratitude to be back in my classroom, seeing my colleagues' and my students' faces again. I've really missed having people around who laugh at my terrible jokes, much to the relief of my fiancée and friends.

Let's be honest, no one trained to be a teacher so that they could sit behind a computer all day on their own. Teaching is a people-centred vocation and I, for one, am delighted to see that all those wonderful people are the same as ever.

The difficulties

It has been challenging to provide meaningful learning experiences for children when you have half of them on a screen and the other half in front of you. I certainly felt more tired and less happy with my teaching for a few weeks but I had to remind myself that this is so new for all of us.

There was no training for us in college for teaching during a

pandemic. We are all adjusting; we are all finding our way through this. We need to continue to put the focus on happiness, inclusion and relationships.

Many of the students on the 'half-and-half' hybrid model were quite nervous and shy to get involved in the class as they suddenly felt more in the spotlight with only a smattering of their friends around. They need our support more than ever now.

The hardest part for me is that so many of the fun aspects have been stripped out of our jobs: the 'fancy dress' days, the graduations, the theatre productions, the sports competitions, the field trips. But if it's tough for us, then imagine what it's like for our students?

They are coming to school and attending our classes with almost no socialising, no sports, no events. Now is the time to really make our classes more engaging, more fun and more centred around our students' lives and personalities.

This unprecedented situation provides us with an opportunity to be brave, explore new approaches and do whatever we can to get our students smiling and fully engaged again.

What can Ireland learn from Switzerland?

The experience in Switzerland, so far, is that cases do not tend to increase when you re-open schools. Again, the number of overall cases here though was low. Nonetheless, schools must obviously put in place whatever mitigating control efforts they can but with an understanding that children will not socially distance in classes or at break times. And that is okay.

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As adults, we are at higher risk so have to be more careful but evidence suggests that it is acceptable to allow children to act relatively normally in school environments.

Going back to school is different and will be different for some time. However, the students are the same, ambitious, inquisitive, funny, wonderful young people whether at home, in class, or on-screen.

My advice to teachers for September, if all goes well, is to put those students at the centre of your planning and don't worry about 'being behind' or where you 'should be' with the curriculum. Now is not the time for this.

Start by focussing on the people in the room and their mental well-being; that includes you, as their teacher. Lower the expectations on yourself and on your students.

Is it a bit scary and nerve-wracking going back? Absolutely. But with the right planning, it can be done. For our students' sake, it needs to be done.

[Liam Printer](#) is a native of Westport, Co. Mayo who has been living and teaching in Switzerland for the past seven years at [The International School of Lausanne](#). He also works as an educational consultant, delivering training and presentations on a variety of teaching approaches for various international schools in Europe and China. He hosts ["The Motivated Classroom"](#) podcast and is completing a Doctor of Education.

