

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Department of

Education

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Dear Colleague

UPDATE ON COVID ISSUES

As the new academic term is now into its second week, I am conscious that you have had to manage a range of challenges. I am very grateful for the dedication that is being shown by all staff in doing everything possible to ensure that our children and young people remain in school. My Department and its arms length bodies will continue to do everything we can to support you.

In [my response to the Assembly debate](#) on Monday, I outlined my position on a number of COVID issues and I want to provide you with an update on those measures. I am also enclosing a letter that I would ask you to forward to parents.

At the core of both the Executive and my Department's strategy in responding to the pandemic is the desire to keep our children and young people in school, wherever possible, while following the public health and scientific advice. We are all aware that the pandemic has been very damaging to our children and young people in terms of their educational, social and emotion wellbeing. Research suggests this is particularly evident in those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However difficult the decisions are, it is vital that we seek to find the right balance in managing the risks of COVID transmission.

It is for this reason that the advice of the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor plays a crucial role in determining my Department's guidance on mitigations. At the Assembly Health Committee last week, the Chief Medical Officer said *"it is really important that there is a doubling down of the baseline mitigations that Northern Ireland schools, DE and EA have maintained in place throughout the pandemic... There is no magic one thing that can be put in place in schools other than a continued focus on all those things that work."* DE guidance has therefore not recommended any further mitigations and we will continue to work closely with the Department of Health to remain aligned with any future public health advice.

There are a range of mitigating measures in place to reduce transmission in educational settings, both those referenced in [DE COVID guidance](#) and also those put in place at a local level in each setting. Examples of these mitigations include use of face-coverings in post-primary schools; a twice weekly asymptomatic testing programme; maximising natural ventilation; retaining pupils in consistent groups wherever possible, and promotion of good hand and respiratory hygiene. Young people aged 12 and over and all staff are also able to access the vaccination programme. This range of mitigations which are in place in educational settings act collectively to reduce risk as much as possible.

Staffing Pressures

In the Assembly debate on 10 January, I outlined actions that are being taken to help to alleviate some of the current pressures on staff in schools:

- Over 150 retired teachers have registered on NISTR following an appeal by my Department just before Christmas. The Department will also be writing out shortly to teachers on a career break with a similar appeal.
- As the majority of student teachers will already be in schools between now and early April we are proposing, if the students and schools are content, that we will relax normal school placement supervision requirements, freeing existing qualified teachers to be used elsewhere within their school. To facilitate this, we are working to address a number of issues including any necessary indemnities for the students, the host schools and the students' university or college.
- I wrote to all school principals on 10 January 2022 to advise that if necessary you can use substitute teachers / staff employed through the Engage II Programme to sustain normal classroom teaching, with the cost being met from your Engage budget.
- The Department is also liaising actively with education sectoral bodies to identify any previously qualified teachers who may potentially be in a position to return to schools for a temporary period of time until pressures have eased.
- Performance Review and Staff Development (PRSD) is an important annual review and staff development process. However, given the intense staffing pressures at present, it has been decided that PRSD will be paused for the 2021-22 academic year, with the intention that it will restart again in September 2022.
- The Youth Service will be offering additional capacity within its Early Intervention programmes to support schools which express an interest.

As you will be aware, a daily staffing survey commenced on 10 January alongside a weekly remote learning survey. Your responses to these surveys will provide valuable information to guide our strategy to combat Covid and I would encourage you to continue to respond to these surveys.

Ventilation

The Department and the EA have put in place a range of measures to support schools to improve ventilation, investing over £2 million this year on ventilation works including the provision of CO₂ monitors, window replacements and air cleaners.

Detailed guidance on ventilation was issued to schools on 7 December 2021. All schools in Northern Ireland have been provided with a supply of CO₂ monitors, and the EA has started distribution to any school that has requested additional monitors. Natural ventilation through the opening of windows is one of the most effective mitigating measures. The [DE COVID guidance](#) states that “*In cooler weather windows should be opened just enough to provide constant background ventilation, and opened more fully during breaks to purge the air in the space.*”

Schools with any concerns about ventilation are advised to contact the EA maintenance helpline for advice and support on the best approach for their individual circumstances. Any work requirement identified will be afforded the highest priority. In some cases where an area of poor ventilation has been identified, it may be appropriate to consider the use of an air filtration unit as an interim measure. These units will be supplied by the EA to affected schools wherever necessary until such times as remedial works are completed. Expert advice from SAGE and the Health and Safety Executive NI continues to be that air filtration units should never be used as a substitute for ventilation.

School Uniform Policy

In light of the importance of maximising classroom ventilation, schools are encouraged to be flexible in applying their school uniform policies to ensure the comfort and wellbeing of pupils while windows and doors are open. Requiring strict adherence to usual school uniform requirements may not be conducive to pupils’ learning during the colder winter months and pupil welfare should be paramount in these circumstances.

Examinations

The intention at present is for public examinations to proceed right across the UK. As you are aware, CCEA has made a range of adaptations to GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications to take account of the disruption experienced by students. CCEA, in line with the other UK exams bodies, will ensure that grading in 2022 takes account of the disruption experienced by learners and that they are not disadvantaged due to the pandemic. My Department has also agreed with CCEA a number of contingency measures to facilitate the awarding of qualifications to those who may miss exams due to illness or self-isolation. Should the public health situation change and public examinations have to be cancelled, I have agreed detailed contingencies for alternative awarding arrangements, which can be stood up at pace. I give you my assurance that all of our young people will be enabled to complete their qualifications and progress to the next phase of education, employment or training.

Pre-school/Childcare Settings

In respect of non-statutory pre-school settings and childcare providers, I have written to the Health Minister and asked that he consider steps to help reduce some pressures on the sector, such as the vetting process, staff:child ratios and the flexibility to mix age groups when needed. For childcare providers, including school-age childcare, work is ongoing to extend the Covid-19 Childcare Temporary Closure Fund to March 2022 and review the Covid-19 Childcare Sustainability Fund.

Current Approach to Testing and Contact Tracing in Schools

The Executive's current arrangements for [testing](#), [self-isolating](#) and [contact tracing](#) for school cases can be found on the NI Direct website. The Education Authority and the Public Health Agency are currently preparing guidance on these issues to ensure school leaders have a clear understanding of the current position and it is anticipated that this will be made available to schools in the coming days.

Letter to Parents

A letter to parents is attached providing an update on COVID issues. I would be grateful if you could forward this to parents of your pupils and young people at the earliest opportunity.

Once again, thank you for your ongoing work and commitment.

Regards

Michelle McIlveen

Michelle McIlveen MLA
Minister of Education