

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

FURTHER CHANGES TO COVID RESTRICTIONS IN EDUCATION SETTINGS FROM JANUARY 2021

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Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): As Education Minister it is my core objective to ensure the ongoing delivery of the high quality education to our young people that we are rightly proud of. That is why, throughout this pandemic, I have followed the medical and scientific advice provided and I continue to do so.

My Department's guidance provides an overarching framework for how schools and education settings can operate safely in an ongoing COVID environment, with the aim of ensuring broad consistency and equity across local areas, but which is sufficiently flexible to allow education settings and staff to adapt and adopt approaches that best suit their needs. As the pandemic has progressed and the medical advice and guidance has changed, so too has the guidance provided to schools, with the current fourth version published on 8 December after clearance by the Public Health Agency.

The Departments of Education and Health have worked closely throughout the pandemic and the proposed way forward which I am setting out today continues to reflect that joint working. Our common aim throughout has been to protect the health and well-being of our children, alongside continuing to enable high quality education to be delivered which will contribute to our children's success both now and in the longer term.

While previous arrangements have been informed by the advice of the Department of Health, unfortunately the deteriorating nature of the epidemic and the risks to public health has necessitated these much more substantial changes being announced today, which reflect a fair and balanced position by both Education and Health.

Therefore, having considered the most up to date advice from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor, I have decided that all primary and post primary pupils will be taught remotely next week. Special schools, nursery and childcare provision will, however, remain open including childcare attached to school settings. From the following week, that is week commencing 11th January, pupils in years 8 through to 11 will continue to be taught remotely until the end of January while pupils in years 12 to 14 will attend school for face-to-face teaching and primary school pupils will return to full time education.

To protect our most vulnerable and sustain vital key services across society, in addition to all special schools being open, all schools will provide supervised learning for vulnerable pupils and the children of key workers from the start of term recognising that these measures place additional stresses on society and that we need to support these children.

Exams due to take place in January will be facilitated and schools will have flexibility to deliver face-to-face teaching to pupils due to sit public examinations, should they wish to do so.

The first day of the school term next week can be used by schools to prepare for the first week.

In reaching this decision I have balanced the potential and projected impact of the pandemic on our wider society against what is my position, that face to face education within educational settings is best for our children and society as a whole.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, leading, at times, to the near-total closures of schools, universities and colleges. School closures impact not only students, teachers, and families but have far-reaching economic and societal consequences. School closures have shed light on various social and economic issues, including digital learning, food insecurity and homelessness, as well as access to childcare, health care and disability services for children. Early evidence suggests that the impact has been more severe for disadvantaged children and their families, causing interrupted learning, compromised nutrition, childcare problems, and consequent economic cost to families who could not work

As this pandemic continues and more data becomes available in early January, I will continue to work closely with Minister Swann to consider how best to support pupils and schools and return to a more normal education delivery as and when the medical and scientific advice indicates this is appropriate.

In the interim and in addition to the adjusted restart arrangement described, further improvements to school mitigations will be taken forward as I indicated in my statement to the Assembly on 21st December including : face coverings being required in classroom settings for post primary pupils, improved signage and stronger public messaging. These will add to the already significant range of mitigations that have been put in place and operated by schools across the province.

Teachers, Principals and all school staff have already done extraordinary work to make schools as safe as possible and played a vital part in how we as a society have adjusted to and managed this pandemic. Their passion and commitment to our children has been obvious to all.

I see evidence of that as I visit schools and talk to teachers and school leaders and of course in the hundreds of letters and emails I have received pressing the case in favour of one policy change or another. I welcome that debate and challenge and hope that, as we rebuild our education system, we can harness that passion and commitment to build a world class education system in Northern Ireland that delivers for all.

