



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

Minutes of Proceedings

17 December 2021

Meeting Location: Teleconference

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mrs Diane Dodds MLA
Mr Harry Harvey MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA

Ms Aoibhinn Treanor (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Marcus Matthews (Clerical Supervisor)
Mr Craig Mealey (Clerical Officer)

Apologies: None



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The meeting commenced at 9:18am in public session.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

Mr Newton joined the meeting at 9:19am.

2. Covid-19 Safety in Schools and Staff Shortages - Oral Briefing from the Minister of Education

The Committee noted:

- Correspondence from a young person with long covid;
- A written statement from the Minister providing a Fair Start progress report; and
- A letter from the Minister to all principals of nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools and EOTAS centres.

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 9:22am:

Miss Michelle McIlveen, Minister of Education, Department of Education

Dr Mark Browne, Accounting Officer/Permanent Secretary, Department of Education

Mr John Smith, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education

Mr Ricky Irwin, Director, Inclusion and Wellbeing, Department of Education

Ms Alison Chambers, Director of Promoting Collaboration and Tackling Disadvantage, Department of Education

Dr Suzanne Kingon, Director of Curriculum, Qualifications and Standards, Department of Education.

The Minister and officials briefed the Committee on Covid-19 Safety in Schools and Staff Shortages.



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This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr McCrossan joined the meeting at 9:48am.

Mr Newton left the meeting at 10:07am.

Mr Butler left the meeting at 10:10am

Mr Sheehan left the meeting at 10:55am.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department representing the concerns of the teaching unions that:

- assistance, support and guidance in respect of necessary class closures be provided to alleviate significant pressure on principals, who despite staff shortages are keeping schools open in support of both pupils and parents;
- comprehensive guidance be provided on mass gatherings in school, particularly with regard to open evenings/taster days;
- further guidance on ventilation be provided;
- difficulties faced by the unions in arranging substitute cover for absences be comprehensively addressed;
- the availability of CO2 monitors and air filtration devices for schools be promoted.

The Committee further requested that the Minister:

- Provide it with an outline of how safety is being maintained in schools in the context of staff shortage and the new omicron strain of covid-19;
- detail contingency plans to cover staff absence due to covid-19;
- detail how many schools and what percentage of schools have CO2 monitors and air filtration devices fitted;
- provide an update on any proposed extension and backdating to October of the childcare sustainability fund;
- provide clarity around the rules for employing staff in special schools whose children attend these schools;
- detail the protocols in place to protect looked after and other vulnerable children during the pandemic;



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- advise on special teachers being allowed to teach in schools which their children or other relatives attend;
- and
- Consider placing screens at teachers' desks.

3. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Minister of Finance to brief the Committee on the Education budget.

4. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next formal Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 12 January 2022 by video conference at 9:30am.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:08am.

Chris Lyttle MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Education

12 January 2022