

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF FACE COVERINGS BY POST-PRIMARY PUPILS IN CLASSROOMS

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Miss McIlveen (The Minister of Education): Members will be aware that my Department's current *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland* currently strongly recommends that post-primary pupils should wear a face covering in classrooms. This is a measure that has been in place due to public health advice as one of a range of measures in schools to help mitigate the risks of virus transmission.

Since the start of the pandemic, our children and young people have experienced huge disruption to their education. One significant aspect of this disruption over the last year has been that post-primary pupils have been asked to wear a face covering for the majority of each day at school. I do not underestimate how challenging that this has been for these young people. I want to thank them and to acknowledge the willingness and resilience that they have shown.

While the use of face coverings, as part of the suite of in-school mitigations, has undoubtedly been beneficial in reducing the numbers of positive cases in schools, they have disrupted learning by making communication with teaching staff and peers more difficult. Many young people will also have found the wearing of face covering for long periods to have been uncomfortable. It is for this reason that I have always been clear that I wish to see the requirement for face coverings to be worn in classrooms to be removed as soon as possible.

I have always ensured that the mitigating measures in place in schools are based upon the public health advice and the prevailing public health position. I have continued to do so on this issue and my officials and I have engaged regularly with the Minister of Health and his officials.

Case numbers among pupils have been particularly high during January and much of February. However, the pupil case numbers reported by the PHA in its weekly *Epidemiology School Bulletin* have showed a sustained decline since their peak in the seven days to 30 January and are now less than 30% of the case numbers at the peak. This is also supported by pupil absences due to COVID-19 having now reduced to levels not seen since before Christmas.

I have now carried out a review of the guidance that recommends that post-primary pupils should wear a face covering in classrooms. I have taken into account the views of the Department of Health, trade unions, school staff, the parents who have either spoken or written to me and the young people who I have met in schools and through other avenues. I have also taken into account a range of studies from across the UK on this issue.

I have been conscious of the need to balance the impact that the wearing of face coverings in classrooms has had on virus transmission with the challenges that wearing a face covering for long periods has brought to our young people and the disruption it has caused to their education.

As a result of my review of this guidance, from 21 March, the recommendation that face coverings are worn by post-primary pupils in classrooms will be removed from my Department's guidance. Their use at this stage will still be recommended in corridors, communal areas and on public and school transport, but they will no longer be recommended in classrooms.

I have sought to give our young people, parents and schools sufficient notice of this in order to allow any preparations to be made.

This change in guidance aligns closely with each of the other jurisdictions in these islands where post-primary pupils are not recommended to wear a face covering in classrooms. I have been conscious of the differences in the case numbers across the other jurisdictions and have therefore been cautious in allowing more time for case numbers in schools here to fall further.

While I believe that we are at the point where the balance of relative risks is now in favour of removing this recommendation from guidance, COVID continues to circulate in our communities and in our schools and we should continue to reduce the risks of COVID in our schools through the range of other mitigating measures that remain in place to protect all pupils and staff. It is for this reason that if any individual wishes to continue to use a face covering in class, I would encourage them to do so.

I would like to again take this opportunity to commend the efforts of all school staff in enabling our children to access their education through the pandemic, despite the challenges that this has presented. Their dedication has ensured that our children and young people can continue to progress through their educational journey.

A guidance note will issue to schools on this issue later today.

Michelle McIlveen

Michelle McIlveen
Minister of Education