

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Department of
Education

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18 December 2020

Dear Principal,

January 2021 – Implications of the latest lockdown on the education sector

Following on from yesterday's announcement by the Executive of a range of further restrictions which will come into effect from 26th December for a 6 week period, I am writing to you to provide an update on plans for the education sector.

I have consistently held the view that it is our public duty to ensure that we continue to provide a high quality education for all our children, even in the midst of this pandemic. My main priority has always been to protect our children's education, mental health and well-being. I believe that this can best be achieved through face-to-face learning and social engagement in schools. I am aware of the actions that you as school leaders, and indeed the entire education workforce, have taken to support that aim. I want to again thank school leaders, teachers and staff who have done tremendous work, under very difficult circumstances, to keep schools safe.

I am mindful of the impact the pandemic is having on our children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable and from disadvantaged backgrounds. We have 30,000 vulnerable children in Northern Ireland, for many of these pupils school is a safe haven and closing schools will immediately deprive them of this safe space. That is why I have decided that it is in the best interests of all pupils for schools to open in the first week of January on the day they were due to return on, so that their education is not disrupted any further and you have certainty regarding the opening of your school and that face to face learning in the classroom will take place.

I fully recognise the fears and anxieties of many regarding their risk of catching this virus as they go about their day serving our society. The simple mitigations of hand washing, ventilation, using protective bubbles, improved social distancing and use of face coverings have proved effective in school settings and I would commend school

leaders for the high levels of compliance in our schools. I urge school leaders to continually implement the Department's Coronavirus Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings - December 2020 and reinforce those key messages throughout their teams and with pupils and parents.

For my part, I will consider what further steps can be taken to help and support schools and will continue to seek the views of principals, school staff and pupils on this issue.

Finally, I want to wish principals, school staff, pupils and everyone who works in education a Happy Christmas. The New Year will bring challenges but by continuing to work together we can get through this.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Weir". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P'.

Peter Weir, MLA
Minister of Education