

18 August 2020

ASCL Northern Ireland Evidence to NI Assembly Education Committee on Reopening of Schools (Restart) for all pupils.

ASCL Northern Ireland welcomed the invitation to attend today's session. Given the in-school demands this week, none of its Executive is available to attend in person, nor is the Regional Officer. Our non-attendance speaks volumes about the pressure that principals and their teams are under at the moment. We appreciate the efforts made by volunteers and Department of Education staff in drawing up the New School Day Guidance.

During the summer term, many educationalists became increasingly concerned about the long-term negative impact of not attending school on our young people's mental wellbeing and the growing gap, commented upon by the Children's Commissioner in England, which was emerging in the educational development between those who were engaging and those who did not nor could not adequately engage with remote learning. As a trade union and professional association, we have continued to ask questions and seek assurances, while supporting members in preparing for a reopening to all pupils. We believe it is important to achieve the right balance between getting pupils back into the classroom as soon as possible and as safely as possible. Parents, pupils, and staff must all have confidence that it is safe to return.

There are several issues which ASCL would like to raise with Committee members:

1. The issue of individual risk assessments for clinically vulnerable staff. Where a decision has been made, as a result of an agreed risk assessment that such an individual's safety cannot be secured through mitigating measures, further guidance on how the recruitment of an appropriate substitute teacher will be financed needs to be issued. School budgets are already stretched beyond capacity. In addition, schools need absolute clarity on how they are going to pay for all of the additional support and practical measures that are being put in place. In the post primary sector there will potentially be a huge challenge in obtaining subject specialist 'subs' if staff are working from home or self-isolating following a positive test result, with a potential impact on learning and teaching.
2. Further clarification on the isolation, while awaiting collection by a parent, of a symptomatic pupil is needed. This/these pupil(s) will require supervision and detailed guidance on and supply of appropriate PPE for the supervising member of staff is crucial.
3. Schools need further guidance on the processes which they will need to implement upon the identification of a 'positive case' and/or 'cluster' within the school.
4. Schools were instructed by the Minister to bring Year 12 and 14 pupils back to school from 24 August. Despite representations by ASCL to DE and CCEA, there has not yet been any public consultation, and subsequently no decisions taken on adjustments to the specification content nor modes of assessment for 2021. This situation is unacceptable given the very major impact on teaching during the previous academic year. With only 3 working days before teachers begin teaching these year groups, urgent clarity is essential.

5. The New Day Guidance states that:

'The school's pupil behaviour policy may need to be reviewed to ensure that it covers COVID-19 related incidents, and as a means to prevent flagrant abuse of the COVID -19 risks, should make provision for the school to be able to sanction, up to and including exclusion, pupils who wilfully refuse to adhere to arrangements of social distancing and deliberately cough or spit at pupils or staff, putting them at risk'.

On behalf of our members and their Boards of Governors, who will have to implement any such difficult decisions, we would ask for a reassurance that they are in every way supported in any disciplinary sanctions that they feel they have to take on occasions when '*pupils ...wilfully refuse to adhere to arrangements of social distancing and deliberately cough or spit at pupils or staff, putting them at risk.'*

Presented on Behalf of the Association of School and College Leaders



Robert Wilson

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