

## FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



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Dear Principal

I hope that you had an enjoyable summer break and had the opportunity to rest and recharge after what has been the most challenging time in a generation for all teaching, non-teaching and support staff.

The New School Day Guidance published by my Department on 19 June 2020 and the supplementary Special School Guidance published on 26 June 2020 were based on planning assumptions for an August 2020 restart. It was always envisaged that this guidance would be 'agile' and subject to review and revision to reflect the prevailing public health position and up to date scientific advice. I have consistently stated that the re-opening of schools will be led by evidence, this remains the case.

Community transmission of Covid-19 remains low in Northern Ireland and you will be aware of the gradual relaxation of restrictions in many other areas of society. You will also appreciate that the global position in terms of re-opening schools is regularly changing. In recent days, governments in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland have all signalled their intention to re-open schools with normal patterns of attendance for all pupils in the coming weeks, in time for the new school term.

Today the Executive agreed that the New School Day Guidance should be updated to reflect a more ambitious approach to Education Restart planning. My strategic objective has always been to achieve maximum face-to-face in class teaching time for all pupils, where safe to do so, at the earliest opportunity – I now believe this is possible sooner than previously expected. However, this is not a return to business as usual.

I am therefore advising today that the existing New School Day guidance will be revised to allow for **all schools and settings to return to more normal patterns of operation and attendance, in line with standard legislative requirements, for all pupils from the week commencing 31 August 2020.** The existing guidance relating to priority cohorts returning on 24 August will remain with schools resuming more normal patterns of operation and attendance during the following week. This means that all children and young people will return to school full-time from the week commencing 31 August 2020, including those who attend Special Schools.

Work is ongoing to revise the guidance and this will be issued to schools next week once the necessary revisions have been completed and the Chief Medical Officer and Public Health Agency (PHA) have considered the final version. However, I know that you will be keen to know what changes will be made therefore, the purpose of this letter is to provide you with an overview in advance of the publication of the detailed guidance for schools.

Firstly, **enhanced hygiene and cleaning measures will remain and are viewed as both vital and non-negotiable.**

**Strict social distancing requirements between all pupils will be relaxed from a specific distance to the best spacing that can be achieved** but will remain in place between adults and, as far as it is practicable between adults and pupils. Schools should continue to implement as much social distancing as is practical and where physical capacity and curriculum delivery permit. On the return to school, the overriding provision will be a full class return with all appropriate and practical protections put in place.

**Protective bubbles will be used as a key mitigating action where possible.** Protective bubbles will be used to segment pupils into a consistent group or groups as far as is practicable. The purpose of using consistent groups is to limit the number of different interactions in any single day. This will reduce the risk of transmission and improve the ability to focus the tracking and tracing of the virus in circumstances where there is a positive test.

I recognise that the approach will vary depending on age group. In pre-schools, primary and special schools, it is envisaged that in most cases a relatively straightforward approach can be adopted. A class will act as a single consistent group or bubble, with minimal prolonged interaction with other classes within the school.

At post-primary, the nature of curricular delivery makes it more difficult to implement a single consistent class group or bubble. It should be possible in some schools for Years 8-10, however, others will require limited mixing into different class groups to adhere to legal requirements for practical subjects. For Years 11-14, it is recognised that a single consistent class group will not be possible, as pupils will be in mixed classes based on their choice of examination courses but schools are encouraged to keep movements and interactions within these year groups to an absolute minimum.

In respect of children with Special Educational Needs, including those attending Special Schools, school leaders will be advised to follow PHA advice and to work with parents and professionals, and if appropriate conduct a risk assessment of an individual child's needs to determine if it is safe for them to return to school safely.

I recognise that the provision of transport is a key element in enabling children and young people to return to school. **While parents and children should be encouraged to use other means of travelling to school for example, walking or cycling where it is safe and reasonable to do so, we recognise that for many children the home to school transport network may be the only available option. There will therefore be no requirement for children to follow public transport guidance for social distancing between pupils on dedicated home to school transport vehicles. However where it is possible to socially distance pupils should do so.** A series of mitigating actions for

transport on these vehicles will be enacted and details will be provided in the revised guidance. Pupils using public transport services will continue to adhere to social distancing guidelines for the general public.

The Summer Food Payment scheme will end on 31 August 2020 and it is my intention that school meals will be available in schools from the week commencing 31 August. It is expected that where possible a hot meal, suitable as the main meal of the day, will be available for free school meals pupils and other pupils who wish to avail of them. **You should advise those pupils returning to school on 24 August 2020 that a packed lunch will be required.**

I appreciate that you will need the revised detailed guidance as soon as possible to help you plan for the return to school and I can advise that, subject to the agreement of our medical colleagues, that this will be published on Wednesday 12 August 2020 or at the latest on the morning of Thursday 13 August 2020.

The successful return to school not only requires school leaders to deploy effective measures to manage risk but the continued support of parents, pupils and wider society to be vigilant and act responsibly within the overarching public health guidelines. To support this, schools will be provided with a template letter that can be issued to parents highlighting the importance of adherence to the public health guidance. This is supported by the Practitioners' Group and will ensure consistency in messaging across schools. The Education Restart Programme will also develop a short leaflet that can be issued to parents via their schools reminding them that they must not send their child(ren) to school if they have any COVID-19 symptoms.

Finally, I am conscious that some of you have suggested that it would be useful if all Education Restart resources were available in a single area. To that end, the Education Restart Programme has now developed an area for all information on the return to schools on the DE Internet which can be accessed [here](#).

I hope that you find this useful. I thank you once again for your ongoing commitment and I have no doubt that every school leader and their teaching, non-teaching and support staff will continue to rise to the challenge and ensure our young people can return to school and continue their education.



**Peter Weir MLA**  
**Minister of Education**