

COVID 19

Exceptional times, Exceptional advice.

In response to all of the recent communications from the Education Minister, Peter Weir and Mr Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary, Department of Education, INTO has been, is and will be engaging in meetings, negotiations and lobbying with the Department of Education, all employing authorities, politicians and Stormont Ministers to represent the views and concerns of our members.

While INTO advice will change as this situation develops, as of today, Sunday 22nd March, INTO confirms to members that schools will be open tomorrow, during normal school hours, to provide “supervised learning” for children, up to the end of year 10, in a supervised learning environment. School places will be limited to vulnerable children and those of key workers in order to ensure that vital services are maintained across the North. (A list of both vulnerable children and key workers is provided in the Letter from Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary Department of Education and the accompanying FAQs issued on March 20th and available on the INTO website)

The Department has recommended that principals survey their parents and staff so that they can estimate both pupil and staff numbers for Monday. Parents should be reminded that there is no requirement for children of Key Workers to be minded at schools, and that this facility should only be used where all other options have been exhausted. The number of children attending schools should be kept to a minimum.

This will help principals make decisions around the viability of opening their school which must be safe for both pupils and teachers. When this information is available, schools should carry out Risk assessment in conjunction with their Board of Governors. Principals are advised to follow strictly the Public Health Agency (PHA) advice in relation to vulnerable groups and be sympathetic to teacher concerns.

Teachers who are pregnant, ill, self-isolating or fall within the defined vulnerable group category or have a caring responsibility for someone falling within the vulnerable group category, should not report for work.

While not exhaustive INTO includes those who are suffering from the following as being 'at risk'.

- chronic (long-term) respiratory diseases, heart disease, Kidney disease; liver disease,
- chronic neurological conditions,
- diabetes
- a weakened immune system
- eligibility for a flu vaccine.

Teachers arriving for work do so on the understanding that supervised learning centres will not be governed by the usual curriculum limitations; essentially pupils will be engaged in various educational activities.

Where practicable, schools may wish to engage a rota system of staff which, while ensuring proper levels of cover, would allow teachers to provide distance learning for pupils from home.

Attending staffs will supervise learning however, no class arrangement, including composite classes, should exceed 33 pupils. This figure originates with the Department of Education from the advice issued on March 16th on Class sizes. INTO advises principals to ignore this number as few classrooms in schools are large enough to accommodate 33 children while still being in line with the social distancing advice issued. There must be no relaxation of class sizes for special schools. Cognisance should be taken in respect to the fact that each child will require at least 4 m² to ensure effective social distancing.

To aid social distancing, temporary substitute cover must be immediately sought to keep pupil numbers as low as possible. Social distancing should be practiced by staff and pupils, in a bid to ensure that risk of exposure to COVID-19 is kept to a minimum.

School leaders should liaise with neighbouring school leaders to explore possible shared staffing and resources.

Teachers may be directed by their principal or volunteer, to attend at schools other than their own.

Members wishing to bring their own children to school with them may do so. However, teachers unable to secure safe supervision for children below school age should not attend school and engage with home remote learning.

Immediate concerns in regard to school hand soap/cleaning supplies will be addressed by EA (028 38368186) who have assured schools they will provide emergency supplies.

Parents need to be informed that school meals will not be available on Monday 23rd and children should bring packed lunches.

While the Departmental guidance allows for children to attend at different schools and single sex schools to adapt, keep in mind-children outside of the two target groups do not attend school until further notice.

Normal school transport will not be available on Monday so teachers must advise parents that they will have to make their own arrangements.

Vulnerable children

Vulnerable children include those children who are in need of protection, or in need, as defined by the Children (NI) Order 1995. Children and young people in need may include those:

Receiving support from Health & Social Services including family support, child protection and looked after children services

On the Child Protection Register

With statements of special educational needs

Accessing EOTAS

Accessing Education Nurture Units

With emerging and diagnosed mental health needs

Who are homeless

Who are young carers

Subject to paramilitary threat

Whose parents have mental health problems

Whose parents have alcohol and drug addictions

Affected by domestic violence

INTO is continuing to lobby the Minister of Education concerning the scope of this group. Principals are strongly advised to carefully consider, and risk assess the challenges meeting the needs of these children will bring. INTO continues to advise that the health and safety of the children and staff must be paramount.

KEY WORKERS

The list is not prescriptive, and flexibility has been encouraged. However, to give some guidance the following outlines the broad categories of what would be defined as a key worker:

Health and Social Care. This includes doctors, nurses, midwives, paramedics, social workers, home carers and staff required to maintain our health and social care sector;

Education and childcare. This includes pre-school and teaching staff, social workers and those specialist education professionals who will remain active during the Covid-19 response;

Public safety and national security. This includes civilians and officers in the police (including key contractors), Fire and Rescue Service, prison service and other national security roles;

Transport. This will include those keeping air, water, road and rail transport modes operating during the Covid-19 response;

Utilities and Communication. This includes staff needed for oil, gas, electricity and water (including sewage) and primary industry supplies, to continue during the Covid-19 response, as well as key staff in telecommunications, post and delivery, services and waste disposal;

Food and other necessary goods. This includes those involved in food production, processing, distribution and sale, as well as those essential to the provision of other key goods (e.g hygiene, medical etc);

Other workers essential to delivering key public services;

Key national and local government including those administrative occupations essential to the effective delivery of the Covid-19 response.