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To: Gerry Murphy
Northern Secretary, INTO

Via email: GMurphy@into.ie

28 April 2020

Dear Gerry,

Thank you for your letter of 17 April to Minister Weir. He has seen your correspondence and has asked that I reply.

The issues we are now facing in education have never been encountered here before, and indeed all areas of society face difficult challenges. As ever, the physical and mental health and well-being of the young people in our care and all our staff must be our priority. The Minister has praised the strenuous efforts of your members, and all school leaders and staff, in maintaining contact with pupils through distance learning and keeping up pastoral links, while providing care for children of key workers and vulnerable children.

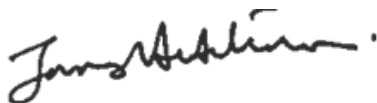
I recognise that there has been speculation around the reopening of schools here, and people are seeing some restrictions being eased in other parts of Europe, including some reopening of schools. However, at present, no decisions have been taken by the Executive on relaxation of the current lockdown, and when decisions are made, they will be based on expert scientific and public health advice. Schools will reopen when it is safe to do so. Any decisions on when and how to re-open schools will be based on expert advice, and will be driven by circumstances rather than timeframe.

The Minister has already asked officials to consider how the Department and the wider education sector can jointly prepare for the return of children to school after the current restrictions are eased. The Department has started work to scope the many issues to be addressed before schools reopen, including those outlined in your letter. In the meantime, our delivery partners are working collaboratively to ensure that appropriate action is being taken to secure, as far as possible, the learning, progression and wellbeing of our children and young people.

As we manage the return to school, we will certainly seek input from stakeholders across the sector, and over the coming weeks, this will take shape. The Department will consult and engage with all relevant parties, including school leaders and trade unions on behalf of staff as this work progresses.

I hope that this addresses your concerns and provides you with some assurance that this matter is a priority for the Department.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James Hutchinson'.

James Hutchinson
Head of Transformation Programme Directorate