

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



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Dear Gerry,

Following my statement, on 21st May, to the Assembly Ad-hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response, I wanted to update you on the Department's plans to take forward the restarting of Education.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the education system has been faced with many unexpected challenges over the past number of weeks. With schools closed to the majority of pupils since mid-March with the exception of those providing crucial support to children of key workers and vulnerable children - principals, teachers and non-teaching staff have responded effectively and innovatively to the challenges presented by the current crisis.

I would like to express my sincere thanks for the strenuous efforts of your members, and all school leaders and staff, for their tireless work to support not just our vulnerable children and the children of key workers, but also the thousands of pupils who are being educated through remote learning.

It is now appropriate to start planning for the future to ensure the education system can restart in a safe and effective manner when conditions allow. While there has been tremendous work done in remote learning over the last number of months, it can never be an ideal substitute for teaching in the classroom, and our ultimate educational goal for the benefit of all pupils must be full time classroom resumption. It is important that we begin to see recovery and a process of phased reopening of our schools.

This however must be led by medical and scientific evidence to ensure that it is done in a manner and in a timescale which is safe for our pupils, our staff and wider society. The pathway to recovery will follow the route outlined in the education section of the Executive Approach to Decision Making document.

You will appreciate that there will be many complex issues to be considered carefully as we plan for Restart. The phased reopening of schools will require engagement, preparation and implementation of arrangements in conjunction with a wide range of stakeholders. I have therefore established the **Education Restart Programme**, which, working alongside a

wide range of stakeholders, will put in place the detailed measures and guidance which will enable a safe phased reopening of schools.

Restart Programme Principles

A number of underlying principles will inform restart planning design and delivery. Education Restart will:

- Be **Evidence Informed** – the timing of Restart will be determined by circumstances and evidence, not by dates.
- Seek to **Protect the Workforce and Learners** – the health and well-being of our workforce and our pupils will be a primary concern.
- Require **Collaboration and Consultation with Stakeholders** – Restart will clearly benefit from the support and confidence of a range of stakeholders including delivery partners, unions, teachers, sectoral bodies, parents and learners.
- Involve **Planning for a New Normal** – the impact on the school day will be significant, a transitional service model is required which ensure education is safe and effective.
- Result in **Phasing and Prioritisation** – stringent social distancing in schools will be difficult to achieve. This will require careful management including phased returns, prioritisation of learners and ongoing blended learning.

Restart Programme Approach

A Programme Board has been established which will provide strategic direction and oversight for the Restart Programme, chaired by the Permanent Secretary with membership drawn from senior officials in the Department, Education Authority (EA), Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA).

Education Restart planning is based on the broad assumption that the education system (and delivery partners) will not be able to return to business as usual from day one. The Programme has identified the following priorities at this stage:

- **Physical Protection** - We will support, protect and enable our workforce as they lead the return to “new normal” education arrangements – protecting learners also.
- **Well-being** - We will focus on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of the education workforce and learners as they return to education.
- **Vulnerable Learners and SEN Services** - We will ensure continuity of vital services to vulnerable learners, including Special Education Needs (SEN) services.
- **Standards and Learning** - To maintain (or re-dress) educational standards acknowledging the period of time learners have experienced outside of the

normal classroom environment and to provide continuity of learning during a “new normal” scenario.

- **A new normal** - We will consider and implement “new school day” arrangements for as long as is necessary, considering practical arrangements in schools relating to transport, school meals, class sizes, daily routines, curriculum delivery and extracurricular activities. To be co-designed with practitioners and stakeholders.

In addition to the above, it will be important to monitor and manage the impact on education funding across each of the priority work areas.

It is important that adequate time is taken to thoroughly plan for the safe and effective re-opening of both formal and non-formal educational settings and you will be aware that there is a range of highly complex issues to be considered. I recognise that schools will want to make preparations for restart in August, particularly during the month of June, and I would aim that the work to deliver the priorities outlined above will be progressed during the remainder of this term.

I would like to highlight that public health guidance, including on social distancing, remains in effect and should be adhered to, as should any required steps to keep the workplace safe from the virus.

I am committed to full engagement with all relevant stakeholders, as we manage the return to school and we need to seek input from stakeholders across the sector. You will hopefully be aware that the Department has established a forum with a focus on wider engagement within the Department and external engagement with the Trades Unions, Managing Authorities and bodies representing sectoral interests. This group will consult and engage with all relevant parties, including school leaders and trade unions on behalf of staff as this work progresses.

I would encourage your participation in this group and hope that I can rely on your continued support in this important programme of work.



Peter Weir MLA
Minister of Education