

James Hutchinson
Education Restart Programme



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To: INTO Members

23 June 2020

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for your correspondence to the Minister of Education, Peter Weir MLA. The Minister has asked that I respond.

The Department is conscious of the real and very practical challenges that all schools are currently facing.

The Minister has praised the strenuous efforts of all school leaders and staff not only for their tireless work to support our vulnerable children, the children of key workers, and the thousands of pupils who are being educated through remote learning but also in terms of the significant amount of planning and preparation needed to get schools ready for the new term.

As you will be aware, the Department has established a Restart Programme, and both the Minister and the Department are consulting with a wide range of stakeholders, including school leaders and trade unions to enable a safe and phased reopening of schools. This Programme is considering issues linked to priority areas including Physical Protection; Well-being; Vulnerable learners and SEN Services; Standards and Learning; New School Day arrangements; and Childcare. The Department is also working closely with the Department of Health and Public Health Agency to ensure that the latest scientific advice is considered in taking forward this work.

In terms of the issues raised in recent correspondence, the Department recognises the frustrations around the Minister's recent announcements in relation to the proposed dates for a return to school. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that many decisions have had to be made very quickly and outside of normal protocols.

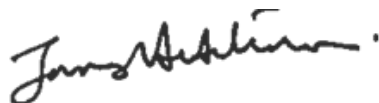
The Department has recognised that the proposed early start date of 17 August 2020 raised significant concerns for some of the education workforce. The Minister has listened to the views expressed by a range of teaching and non-teaching staff representatives and has now, following agreement with the Northern Ireland Executive, announced a revised date for reopening of 24 August 2020 for those pupils in Primary 7, Year 12 and Year 14.

Given the length of disruption caused by COVID-19, the proposed additional measures to assist key cohorts are appropriate. The Minister recognises that this has been a challenging time for all staff and that they will need a break over the summer. In addition, the Department is cognisant of staff contractual arrangements and the Minister has asked that the conditions of service are honoured with alternative arrangements for time off being made later in the year. As there is a focus on three specific years it is anticipated that many teachers will be unaffected, particularly in primary schools, although it is acknowledged that more teachers may need to return to deliver all subjects for Year 12 and Year 14.

Turning to the rationale for Minister's decision to bring key cohorts back to school on 24 August 2020. Primary 7 is a vital transitional year as children prepare to leave primary school and enter post-primary education. This is a major change in their educational journey. Year 12 and Year 14 are key examination years. Other jurisdictions (e.g. England, Scotland and Wales) are all bringing similar cohorts back earlier in August for similar reasons. In addition, it is important that schools bring back cohorts gradually to allow a smoother return for teachers and pupils alike, rather than all pupils starting school on the same day. It may also help that older children may acclimatise more easily and provide lessons to pave the way for younger children to return.

The Department is well aware it cannot deliver the Restart Programme without the support and confidence of the education workforce. Detailed [Northern Ireland Schools Re-opening Guidance](#) was published on 19 June 2020 and supplementary guidance will issue in the coming weeks. To this end, the Department will continue to work alongside stakeholders through both Practitioners Groups and the established consultative fora to ensure a safe and effective re-opening of schools for the benefit of our children and young people.

Yours sincerely,



James Hutchinson
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