

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Mr Gerry Murphy
Northern Secretary
Irish National Teacher's Organisation
Vere Foster House
23-24 College Gardens
BELFAST
BT9 6BS

Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgill
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

Tel: 028 9127 9306
Email: private.office@education-ni.gov.uk

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Dear *Gerry*

Thank you for your letter of 4 September 2020 covering the National Testing Initiative (NTI) (test kits for schools) and finance issues.

From the outset, I want to assure you that I share the frustrations of schools and the Trades Unions regarding the administration of the initiative. As I understand is now clear, these have not been of the Department's making and my officials have expressed in the strongest possible terms our disappointment.

I further understand that a letter of apology has now been issued by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to our schools (again at our insistence) and that we are close to finalising guidance with our colleagues in the Department of Health. We also continue to work with DHSC to address the unexpected and unhelpful delivery of test kits to a number of schools. This also ran contrary to our discussions with DHSC. These matters, as you will appreciate, will take time.

I would like to turn to the remaining points you have raised in your letter (and I also understand that in addition to writing to me, INTO has helpfully considered and offered its feedback on the draft guidance and that the guidance will reflect that feedback).

This initiative is not about the application of Track and Trace arrangements in schools – it is, as you have asked us to reflect in the guidance, about ensuring that there is a range of test options to ensure no child/young person displaying COVID symptoms cannot access a test.

Schools will not administer tests, nor are they expected to register which child has received a test (which they will not in any case know as they have no role in the registration process). Their role, as regards test kits, is to offer that option to a

parent or carer only where there is concern about getting access to a test under normal arrangements.

Schools will not be interacting with the Department of Health or the Public Health Agency (PHA) on any aspect of this initiative.

Responsibility for administering and registering a test offered under the initiative rests solely with the parent/carers – the school has no role in returning a test to the testing agency.

As there will be no testing in or return of tests to schools, no Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) issues arise.

These kits, as I have already explained, are to be used only as a measure of last resort, but the guidance will set out arrangements for reordering if required. This will be through DHSC channels as that Department is responsible for the initiative.

Parents/carers cannot “demand” a test kit from a school – they should seek a test at one of the four fixed sites or the mobile units. I emphasise again that the kits allocated to schools are to be used only in exceptional circumstances.

Finally, access to a kit, where circumstances suggest this is appropriate, should not under any circumstances be “means assessed”.

I will now turn to the issues you have raised regarding funding for PPE.

The Department's New School Day Guidance clarifies that in accordance with the PHA the routine use of PPE within education settings is not required other than for certain tasks deemed to be of higher risk of transmission. PPE is only needed in a very small number of cases; working with children, young people and pupils whose care routinely already involves the use of PPE, due to their intimate care needs; and giving children medication.

As you have stated in your letter, allocations to schools for PPE and other Covid-19 related costs, excluding teacher substitution, were allocated to schools on a per pupil basis for the first term of the academic year, mitigating these costs for schools. The basis of allocation was to reflect the funding provided, in line with the guidance, and was to support the safe reopening of schools.

Restart funding for Special schools will be managed centrally by the Education Authority (EA). The Department, in conjunction with the EA, will continue to monitor funding requirements as schools reopen and as the pandemic progresses and any school facing financial difficulty should contact the EA as Funding Authority for all grant-aided schools, in the normal way.

You suggest that the Department should now pause and evaluate its response to Covid-19 to date. My Department has always balanced the interests and well-being of children and young people with the need to recognise the concerns of and contributions made by schools and that will continue to be the case moving forward.

In addition, I am on record acknowledging the contribution of the Consultation Group (which includes the Trades Unions and, of course, yourself as a member of the Group) that has worked with us under the arrangements put in place in March.

I am satisfied that these arrangements have been appropriate given the unprecedented circumstances we have found ourselves in and have supported the safe reopening of our schools, informed at all times by medical and scientific advice.

Finally, I understand that in recent engagement with the Department you have sought to encourage us to move away from "restart" terminology towards longer term stability of this new way of operating. Your call to pause and evaluate is timely as this, in my view, is absolutely the correct way forward for the education sector and I can advise that my Department's attention is already moving towards stabilisation for the year ahead.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Weir', written in a cursive style.

**PETER WEIR MLA
MINISTER OF EDUCATION**