

GM/CMcD

30th December 2020

Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
GD 36 Stormont Castle
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3T

Dear First Minister and Deputy First Minister

I write following the failure of the Minister of Education to respond to the offer I made on behalf of INTO on December 23rd to work with Minister Weir and those of our members who are struggling to prepare their schools for re-opening next week in the face of this accelerating pandemic.

I believe that the education partners would support further changed arrangements to the school year on public health grounds in the interest of securing safer schools for pupils, staff, and their families in the time ahead. The INTO remains strongly committed to supporting our 7,000 members in safe workplaces, as they endeavour to teach and support the wellbeing of their pupils at school where children undoubtedly benefit greatly. However, it is now becoming very clear that the ability of schools to operate normally is likely to be seriously impaired due to the higher numbers of staff and students who will need to self-isolate and/or restrict movement in the weeks following Christmas.

You may wish to consider the following issues when making an informed judgement regarding the most appropriate date for reopening schools next month.

- December 29th has seen the highest number of positive cases identified since testing began, 1566 new cases in the last 24 hours. We are aware that public health risk assessments in schools have continued beyond Christmas day and that the number of staff members testing positive in schools has increased in recent weeks.
- Dr Tom Black, Chairperson of the British Medical Association in NI is forecasting a third wave of infections in mid-January and that more cases of the new variant Covid-19 will be seen.
- This new strain of Covid-19, which reportedly is 70% more transmissible and may present an increased risk among children, has now been identified in N Ireland.
- The director of operations at the Northern Health Trust is reported as describing the Covid-19 inpatient numbers have not abated in her trust area and that she is not seeing a downturn. There is no reason this situation is not being reflected across the other Trusts.
- A larger number of people hospitalised due to Covid-19 than at any time since mid-May.

- There is an acute shortage of substitute teachers in certain parts of the north and in particular of STEM subject specialists as confirmed by INTO to officials of the Department of Education in November and December 2020.

An extension of the school closures for another week, at least, would give school leaders and Boards of Governors time to put enhanced measures in place prior to the beginning of term including:

- supports for the larger number of pupils who will not be in a position to return to school for a few weeks.
- the sourcing of substitutes to cover for staff members who will be absent for a number of weeks having been deemed to be close contacts of confirmed cases or having tested positive during the Christmas closure.
- the supply of additional PPE and sanitising liquids, where school supplies are running low.
- an opportunity for school leaders and school Governors to revise their Covid-19 plans, something that INTO believes will be very necessary when the rate of infection in the community is growing so alarmingly.

Our measured proposal to delay the commencement of the Spring term by a minimum of four school days [at least] is designed to minimise disruption to pupils and their families, while providing schools with much needed time to put enhanced safety measures and supports in place. The extra time would also provide the Executive with another opportunity to launch an intensive public awareness campaign on the importance of safe schools and how the public and parents can contribute to this, as promised by the Minister in his recent statement to the Assembly.

In our view the Executive would also be better placed late next week to take account of emerging scientific evidence regarding the new variants of Covid-19 than you possibly could be within the next seven days.

The INTO remains available to work constructively with you in the best interests of everyone in school communities. We trust that you will give this matter your urgent attention.

Yours sincerely



GERRY MURPHY
Northern Secretary

cc Peter Weir, Minister of Education