FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

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Dear Parent

Firstly can I say that our children and young people should be praised for adapting so well to the impact of COVID on their education. As parents you have continued to offer invaluable support to our schools and educational settings to enable your children's learning to continue, particularly during periods of disruption. Our educational staff have continued to ensure that children remain at the core of all of their work despite the range of difficult challenges that they continue to face. Everyone in the education sector will continue to work as hard as we can to ensure our children and young people can continue their learning in a safe environment.

We are now in the midst of another phase of the pandemic, with the new Omicron variant leading to significant case numbers across our communities. Case numbers in children and staff are likely to continue to reflect those in the community and we can expect some disruption in the coming weeks. My focus has been, and remains, on the continuing provision of education within our schools for all our children.

The pandemic affects us all and so much of our lives has been disrupted by the need to follow the public health advice. Your children have already endured very significant disruption to their education. I want to reassure you that the NI Executive continues to have a shared objective to keep schools safe and open, because the best place for children and young people is in school.

There continue to be measures in educational settings to help manage COVID-19, including those put in place locally by each school and setting. These include:

- use of face-coverings in post-primary schools;
- a twice weekly asymptomatic testing programme;
- maximising natural ventilation;
- retaining pupils in consistent groups wherever possible; and
- promotion of good hand and respiratory hygiene.

Young people aged 12 and over and all staff have also been able to access the Executive's vaccination programme. All of these measures together are helping us to keep our schools open and reduce risk. The current public health advice does not recommend any additional measures and the Chief Medical Officer said at the Health Committee last week *"T*here *is no magic one thing that can be put in place in schools other than a continued focus on all those things that work."*

Much has been said on the importance of ventilation in reducing COVID risks. I have been advised by Health colleagues that natural ventilation, by opening windows, is the single most effective measure. The installation of air filtration units would not, for example, allow schools to close the windows as natural ventilation remains paramount. Opening windows periodically can, at this time of year, result in cooler classrooms. Schools will do their best to keep classrooms at an appropriate temperature and I have encouraged them to be flexible in their uniform policy to ensure pupils are able to be comfortable. If your school has any issue with ventilation, be assured that my Department has made funds available to carry out any necessary works.

We do have to recognise that in some cases over the next few weeks schools may not be able to continue to operate as normal. There may be staff shortages due to illness or self-isolation and there could be significant numbers of pupils absent as well. Schools have plans in place to deal with these issues and this means your child may experience some changes to their normal school day. This could include the need to use more substitute teachers, to prioritise teaching for those pupils sitting key exams, or in some cases to move pupils to remote learning for short periods until pressures have eased. I have confidence in the leaders of all our schools and education settings to do all that is necessary to protect and support our children and their learning in the time ahead.

On Monday I outlined in the Assembly how we are helping schools who are having difficulties with teacher sickness levels, including asking recently retired teachers to come back to work and seeking to bring other qualified teachers back into schools. I have also asked student teachers to provide additional help in the coming weeks.

The intention at present is for public examinations to go ahead across the UK. CCEA, the local examination board, has made changes to GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications to take account of the disruption experienced by students. This means that students will have to take fewer examinations in Summer 2022. More detailed information is available on the CCEA website. CCEA will also ensure that grading for students in 2022 takes account of the disruption experienced by learners and that they are not disadvantaged due to the pandemic.

There are also back-up plans in place for pupils who miss exams due to illness or self-isolation. Should the public health situation change and public examinations have to be cancelled, I have agreed contingency arrangements for qualifications to be awarded on the basis of teacher judgement, as in 2021. All of our young people will be enabled to complete their qualifications and progress to the next phase of education, employment or training.

Although there is likely to be some continued disruption in schools in the time ahead, I want to recognise how all of those involved have continued to show extraordinary determination and resilience throughout this pandemic. It has been a long and difficult road that we have all travelled over the last two years, I hope and trust that there are much brighter days ahead.

Regards

Michelle McIlveen

Michelle McIlveen MLA
Minister of Education