

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



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Dear Principal

COVID INFORMATION POSTERS, SUPPORT CHECKLISTS AND THE BENEFITS OF BUBBLES IN SCHOOLS

I write to you in your capacity as both a school leader and your role working alongside your school's Board of Governors. I would again like to acknowledge the work of all our school leaders and staff throughout these challenging times. The dedication and diligence shown across our schools by staff during recent times has been extraordinary. It is also appropriate for me to recognise the invaluable work that continues to be undertaken by Boards of Governors in ensuring the effective stewardship of schools, particularly in light of the rapidly evolving nature of the Executive's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Executive's Pathway to Recovery document should provide us all with reassurance that its approach to relaxing restrictions is taking place on the basis of the relevant medical and scientific advice. To do otherwise would risk the progress that we as a society have made in allowing restrictions to be gradually eased. Medical and scientific advice has been crucial to the development of my Department's guidance for the operation of schools during the pandemic and it continues to work very closely with the Department of Health to ensure that restrictions and disruption to normal school activities are in place for no longer than absolutely necessary.

An important aspect of ensuring that the Department's guidance is able to be implemented effectively in schools is by seeking to ensure that the key messages and actions are clearly understood and reinforced. It is for that reason I attach a number of documents that have been produced with input from the Department of Health. They have also taken account of feedback from the Department's Practitioners Group of school leaders and also from Trade Unions.

There are two support checklists that have been developed, one for Boards of Governors and one for teachers. The Board of Governors checklist seeks to remind governors of the key COVID issues that they should consider in their work. Many/all of the suggested actions in the checklist will already be taking place in your school and this checklist does not ask schools to do anything that is not already within the DE guidance. There is also no requirement for any additional reporting against this checklist to the Department or the Education Authority. It simply aims to allow Boards of Governors to be reassured that they are already undertaking the COVID actions

that are within the existing DE guidance. The Board of Governors' checklist is attached to this letter. An Irish language version of this checklist will be available upon request.

The checklist for teachers aims to be a simple aide memoir to all teachers that could be prominently displayed in each classroom to help to remind teachers of some of the key COVID messages. These messages will be entirely familiar to staff and pupils, however as is the case across society, the Executive is seeking to ensure that key messages are reinforced as restrictions are relaxed.

My Department has also produced three posters with key COVID-19 messages, each targeting a different audience:

- poster 1 - key messages for all parents
- poster 2 - key messages for post-primary pupils
- poster 3 - key messages for primary pupils

I would ask that you display the posters relevant to your school in prominent positions. Both the checklist for teachers and the posters, including Irish language versions, are available on the Department's website at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/education-restart-primary-and-post-primary-posters-checklists-schools>

As restrictions across society are lifted, I believe it would be helpful to reinforce the need for the mitigations that remain in place and that we should continue to do what we can to ensure all our children and staff remain safe in schools. One such mitigation is the use of protective bubbles for supporting pupils up to Year 10. Their key purpose is to reduce the likely number of close contacts that a child or staff member has within their educational setting and to simplify the process of close contact identification. If a child or staff member tests positive for COVID-19, the number of close contacts that are asked to self-isolate is likely to be less and able to be identified more quickly when bubbles are being used effectively.

To ensure that the number of pupils and staff impacted by a positive case is minimised, it is crucial that educational settings continue to follow the public health advice on this issue and maintain the consistent of bubbles wherever possible.

The DE guidance recognises that there are times where this may not always be possible and that other relevant mitigations should be put in place in line with DE guidance. Pupils should therefore still be able to access services and activities that may involve mixing with pupils from outside their bubble such as school transport, practical work in class and wraparound care.



Peter Weir MLA
Minister of Education