

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Department of
Education

www.education-ni.gov.uk

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 Principal

DE COVID-19 GUIDANCE TO EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

I wrote to you last week on the current position of the revised DE COVID-19 Guidance for Educational Settings. On 12 August the Executive ratified a range of relaxations, some of which impact on the delivery of education and more widely on children and young people. Since that meeting, my officials have revised the guidance to reflect the recent Executive decisions. I am now pleased to inform you that the revised DE Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland is available on the DE website.

[DE Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland](#)

The guidance seeks to build upon the experiences of school leaders and staff since the start of the pandemic and allow schools greater flexibility to determine how much of the guidance will be applied in their school. This allows for the individual circumstances of each school to be taken into account by schools leaders in determining the measures to be put in place to ensure that the children and young people in their school can access their education in a safe environment.

The guidance has been developed in close partnership with the Department of Health to ensure that the public health position taken into account. While the comments of the Educational Practitioners Group of school leaders and Trade Union representatives have been taken into account, I recognise that the need for this guidance being published as early as possible after the Executive's decisions has meant that the more detailed consultation and engagement that would have preferable, has not been possible.

While I would obviously encourage school leaders to consider the guidance in full, I would highlight a small number of areas that have changed in the guidance ahead of the new academic year.

Educational settings are no longer required to operate a system of formal protective bubbles. However, the need for educational settings to continue to support effective contact tracing means that they are asked to maintain a cautious and measured approach that still seeks to maximise the time where pupils are within a consistent group of pupils. The guidance allows for each educational setting to determine if they wish to continue to use some/all of the principles of bubbles that they will have used during the 2020-21 year, particularly if they believe that they have proved effective in mitigating virus transmission and that pupils' ability to learn will not be unduly impacted.

The Executive's position on the use of face coverings by post-primary pupils in classrooms is that they should continue to be worn inside all school buildings including classrooms from the start of the new term. The Executive agreed that the requirement for post-primary pupils to wear a face covering in classrooms would, subject to review, apply until 8 October.

In terms of the requirement for staff and pupils to self-isolate if they are identified as a close contact of a positive case, the Public Health Agency is currently preparing guidance to ensure that the new requirements for school aged children to only self-isolate until they have received a negative PCR test apply equally to all pupils in each year group. Staff who are fully vaccinated are not required to self-isolate if they are identified as a close contact. Schools are not expected to verify pupils' compliance with the policy in terms of PCR test results or the vaccination status of either staff or pupils. The approach taken by the Executive throughout the pandemic has been to work with people, trusting them to comply with the guidance and regulations in place. Further guidance on the self-isolation requirements for close contacts of a positive case is available on the [Public Health Agency](#) website.

Finally, the hygiene measures section of the guidance reflects the current public health advice in relation to the relatively low risk of virus transmission associated with surface contacts in educational settings and the approach that should be taken by schools in relation to shared resources and items brought to school such as school bags and stationery items.

I am confident that the Department's revised guidance provides educational settings with a framework that gives flexibility to school leaders so that they can allow all our

children and young people to access all aspects of their education in the new year within an environment that continues to mitigate the risks of virus transmission. It will continue to be revised to reflect any changes agreed by the Executive. While schools should continue to be cautious in their approach to managing the risks associated with COVID-19, I expect that school pupils and staff should be able to fully embrace the range of educational opportunities offered within the new academic year.

I wish all school leaders and staff well in the new academic year.

Michelle McIlveen

MICHELLE MCILVEEN MLA

Minister of Education