

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



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To: All Principals of Nursery, Primary, Post-Primary and Special Schools and EOTAS Centres

Dear Principal

As we approach the Christmas holidays, I would like to take this opportunity to thank-you for your outstanding work and that of all school leaders, teaching and support staff during the autumn term. I know that your priority has continued to be providing high quality education for all our children in the midst of the most challenging of circumstances brought about by the pandemic.

Over the last term, I have greatly enjoyed visiting so many schools across Northern Ireland and it has been wonderful to see our children return to the classroom and once again engaging in practical work, playing sports and enjoying a wide range of extra-curricular activities. These visits have reaffirmed the importance of our children being educated within the school environment not only in terms of the educational benefits but also in protecting and developing their emotional health and resilience.

The scale of the disruption to teaching and learning since March 2020 has been unprecedented. We know that our children and young people have been greatly affected by the pandemic, both in terms of their education and their ability to socialise and participate in the many and varied activities that benefit them outside of formal education. International research suggests that despite provision of remote learning,

pupils are experiencing learning losses due to school closures and a reduction of in-school instruction time.

I know we are all particularly mindful of the specific impacts on our most vulnerable children and young people. For many of these children, school is not only a place to learn but it also represents a place of safety and refuge. When we prioritise keeping our children and young people in the classroom, we have these children at the forefront of our minds.

I do not, however, underestimate the significant challenges you have faced in the difficult and critical task of operating our schools safely. Over recent weeks, many schools have experienced difficulties in sourcing a sufficient number of substitute teachers, support and ancillary staff to cover staff absences. This is particularly acute in certain sectors, subject areas and geographical areas. My Department, in conjunction with our education support bodies, is actively considering a range of options for how best to respond to the staffing issues many schools face. The emergence of the Omicron variant also brings uncertainty for society in terms of its implications. In some circumstances, schools may need to utilise remote learning for short periods during the Spring Term and the recent Remote Learning Circular will be helpful in guiding you through this process.

We will also continue to work together to reduce the spread of COVID-19. My Department's COVID-19 guidance provides an overarching framework for how schools and education settings in Northern Ireland can operate during the pandemic. As we all are aware, mitigations such as good hand and respiratory hygiene, the use of face coverings by older pupils, good ventilation, as well as regular testing help us to detect cases early, reduce spread, and keep students in school.

As an important mitigating measure ahead of the new term, I would encourage schools to ask all staff and post-primary pupils to take a lateral flow test within 24 hours of their return to school in January.

As we have seen many times during the past 20 months, the pandemic can bring rapid changes. The impact of Omicron on our society is still emerging, and we will continue

to work closely with our colleagues in the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency to keep our schools open and safe.

In terms of contingency planning, my Department continues to prepare for all scenarios. Last year saw a lot of work done on implementing mitigating measures in schools and I anticipate that if such additional measures are needed again in future, they could be reintroduced as required. I give you my assurance that we will keep in close and regular communication over the weeks ahead.

Finally, I would like to wish you, your school leadership and all your staff a peaceful and Happy Christmas. The New Year will bring many challenges but I know that by continuing to work together we will face these challenges and continue to focus on meeting the needs of our children and young people. Thank you once again for your continued dedication and commitment.

Yours faithfully

Michelle McIlveen

**MICHELLE MCILVEEN MLA
MINISTER OF EDUCATION**