



The Educational
Institute of Scotland

Mr John Swinney
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for
Education and Skills
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

LF/KN/DFM 061020
6 October 2020

By email

Dear John

I write to you in your capacity as your Party's Education Spokesperson, to brief you on the EIS view with regard to today's FM statement in Parliament, which looks likely to introduce a "circuit breaker" of some sort, although we don't yet know the detail.

This appears to be timed deliberately to coincide with the school October break and as such it appears to many teachers to show scant regard for their health and well-being and for that of other term time staff.

Schools have reopened fully with no physical distancing amongst pupils and with rules which apply outside of school not applying inside e.g. rule of six; two households maximum; and mandatory face coverings in "crowded areas". This has made daily attendance at work a stressful and risk laden exercise, but teachers understand the importance of education and have sought to deliver the best educational experience they can for pupils.

Workload levels are through the roof, however, and many staff have had little break even over the summer as schools sought to adapt to the Scottish Government's last-minute unilateral switch from blended learning to a full pupil return.

Put simply, this term to date has been the most stressful that members can remember.

There was some concern therefore when a so-called circuit-breaker to coincide with the school October break was first mooted.

I raised these concerns at CERG and was supported there by others.

Staff well-being needs to be a concern for all, therefore, or we will end up with burn-out and schools going to part time education because of staff absence. For many teachers the Government's apparent focus on the "opportunity presented" by the October break seems to show little concern for them or their well-being.

It is important for teachers and pupils to have the opportunity of a break without undue confinement. Restrictions so far have led to a detrimental mental health impact for pupils and staff so there is a need in the October break to maximise time for being outdoors ahead of winter, for young people to play, and for staff, pupils and family to be able to enjoy the benefits of being on holiday.

The EIS is not opposed to a "circuit breaker" per se but question the need for it to be aligned with the school holidays which already will provide a natural reduction in economic activity and which occur before the impact of the most recent restrictions have worked themselves through the system.

If the Scottish Government need to be seen to be doing something, perhaps it could address the issue of physical distancing in schools by employing the additional staff required and supporting the physical expansion of the school estate to accommodate such. Planning in this area, which was being worked on when blended learning was the preferred option, has simply been set aside. Or it could address the ventilation challenges which schools face as winter approaches. Or it could address the daily risks being faced by previously shielding teachers who are back in school.

In short, I hope that in the Parliament's debate the welfare and well-being of school staff might feature as something more than a footnote.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Larry Flanagan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'L' and a long, sweeping underline.

Larry Flanagan
General Secretary