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Larry Flanagan
General Secretary
EIS

12 August 2020

Thank you for your letter dated 3 August, highlighting concerns raised at the EIS Executive meeting on 31 July, and for sharing the summary findings of your membership survey, which I have taken time to read and consider.

I appreciate the commitment you have given to the shared ambition of having schools reopen safely in August. The most important factor in considering the risk of returning to school is the prevalence of Covid-19 within the community – the infectious pool and how well this is being controlled. In considering when schools can reopen safely, the overall trends in Scotland are very encouraging. The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) issued a note last week on how the current scientific evidence on COVID-19 and children and young people applies in Scotland. This provides welcome up-to-date scientific and clinical context. We will of course take account of emerging evidence and may take this as a regular item on the sub group's agenda going forward and mechanisms are being put in place to ensure regular evidence updates are provided and communicated with teachers and other staff.

I believe our partnership working as part of the COVID-19 Education Recovery Group was one of the strengths in delivering the clear messages set out in the guidance. I want to be clear; I stand very firmly behind the decisions we have agreed as partners of the COVID-19 Education Recovery Group. I know we all agree on the overarching point that the benefits of returning children and young people to full time education are, and have always been, at the forefront of our minds. However, I recognise that it is essential for all staff and pupils to feel safe and supported in their return to school next week.

Tha Ministearan na h-Alba, an luchd-comhairleachaidh sònraichte agus an Rùnaire
Maireannach fo chumhachan Achd Coiteachaidh (Alba) 2016. Faicibh www.lobbying.scot

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Additional staff and class sizes

As we begin the new academic year our schools and teachers will face many new challenges. It is vital that these challenges do not become a barrier to education recovery and renewal.

As you know we are making a total additional investment of £135 million to ensure that our children, young people and staff can be welcomed safely back into schools. This includes £75 million to bring additional teachers into Scotland's classrooms in the new school year, to promote education recovery, renewal and a more resilient education system. We hope that additional teachers in classrooms this year will also help to accelerate progress towards our overall aim of excellence and equity in Scottish education.

This funding is sufficient for local authorities to recruit approximately 1,400 additional qualified teachers, although final numbers will be dependent on the precise mix of staff recruited and the needs of children and young people in our schools. We expect that these additional teachers will provide a range of additional support to help reframe the recovery work, including supporting schools to alter class sizes and composition where possible, as set out in the guidance. We are in no doubt that there have been negative impacts of a prolonged period out of school during lockdown, and now is the time to inject energy, pace and a renewed focus on all children achieving.

All staff have a vital role in this and as the new term begins additional staff can offer support to groups of learners who need more intense support and cover classes for teachers who are self-isolating. They will also be vital in responding to any further local outbreaks of the virus, which could necessitate implementation of contingency plans for blended learning for a period.

As you are aware, we have also been working with the General Teaching Council for Scotland to ensure that retired teachers, and registered teachers who are not currently teaching, can quickly get back into the profession wherever this proves necessary.

Scientific advice and evidence

Throughout the Covid response the Government has been guided by the latest scientific advice. In line with the advice received from the COVID-19 Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues, primary pupils will not need to physically distance from each other. The scientific advice also makes clear that distancing between pupils is not required for a safe return to secondary schools as long as population prevalence remains low and other mitigations are in place. It is important to understand that the advice developed by the sub-group is in the specific context of schools. There are sound reasons for approaches to physical distancing to vary in different contexts, including the drawing of judgements about cumulative risk across the whole of society and the features of distinct environments.

However, as an additional precautionary measure, the guidance says that where possible secondary schools should take practical, proportionate steps to encourage distancing between young people, particularly in the senior phase, provided it does not introduce capacity constraints. This goes beyond the requirements of the scientific advice, and represents an additional measure to minimise risk.

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How best to achieve this will differ from school to school but, in order to optimize the opportunities to share learning, I am asking Education Scotland to ensure effective mechanisms are in place for schools and local authorities to share examples of good practice in this area.

EIS and other trades unions and partners have been closely involved in all our efforts to ensure that all necessary support is provided to schools. On personal protective equipment (PPE), the guidance sets out our agreed position on what will be required in different circumstances. Importantly – and to recognise that some will be anxious, particularly in the initial weeks – it includes provision for anyone wishing to wear a face covering in school to be allowed to do so. As the wearing of face coverings becomes more common in wider society, it is likely many will choose to do so.

Surveillance and testing

Scotland has an excellent programme of community surveillance and I am glad you welcome the surveillance measures we are putting in place. They will go a long way to reassuring us all. You mention a proactive approach to testing. The most important testing in this context is of course rapid testing of all with symptoms, testing in response to cases/outbreaks and testing as part of targeted surveillance. We have both heard from the clinicians that routine testing of those without symptoms is of itself less effective, for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless I accept and share your desire to build confidence. We can therefore agree that arrangements will be in place for all staff who are concerned they may have been at risk of infection, and wish to be tested, to have informed access to testing through their employer.

Shielding

The decision to pause shielding was taken in the context of very low rates of the virus in the community. We will continue to review this, and we will not hesitate to take additional steps to safeguard those at the highest risk if the clinical evidence tells us we should.

We recognise that some people will be anxious about a return to work after they have been shielding. As you note, we have developed a specific risk assessment tool, to help employers and employees across all industries understand individual risk factors, and how these might be mitigated. The tool can be found here:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-individual-risk-assessment-for-the-workplace/>

We would expect schools to use this tool to support conversations with teachers and other staff to ensure they can be supported to return safely, taking into account their individual circumstances and any concerns they may have. We would also expect staff in this position to discuss their own needs with their healthcare provider.

My expectation is that the approach set out in the guidance provides welcome reassurance, combined with financial support, while also ensuring there is discretion of robust and appropriate local solutions to achieve our shared aims.

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Thank you for sharing the results of your membership survey and I would encourage you and your members to continue to feedback on how the return to school works in practice. This is an important way to help us identify and resolve issues as they arise. I know you agree with me that the value of the school experience to our young people cannot be over-estimated, and are as keen as I am to see everyone back in school as soon as we safely can for all parties.

Yn,
J

JOHN SWINNEY

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