

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



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Dear Principal,

Phased return of pupils to start in March

I want to thank each and every member of our education workforce for the excellent work in delivering remote learning to children since January, supporting them through these difficult times and providing supervised learning for vulnerable pupils and children of our key workers. I also want to acknowledge the dedication of staff in our Special Schools and EOTAS Centres which have continued to operate since the beginning of term.

I am pleased to announce a phased return to full time face-to-face teaching for certain pupils. In the meantime all schools should continue to provide supervised learning for vulnerable pupils and children of key workers. Special schools and EOTAS Centres will continue to operate as normal.

I can advise that:

- from 8 March until 19 March, pupils in pre-school, nursery and primary schools pupils in P1 to P3 will return to full-time face-to-face teaching. This does not include any children in other primary school years who may be in composite classes with these pupils; and,
- pupils in years 12 to 14, who will be awarded qualifications in summer 2021, will return to full time face-to-face teaching with effect from 22 March 2021.

Reflecting the alternative awarding arrangements for summer 2021, those schools who have pupils who are either (i) taking CCEA GCSE maths in 2021 as a prerequisite for entry in Further maths in 2022 or (ii) early entries for CCEA GCSE Irish in Irish medium

schools or units or where the learner intends extending their learning through GCSE Gaeilge, will, if they choose to do so, be permitted to offer these pupils face to face classes in these subjects.

In recognition that any further increase in pupil attendance before mid-April has the potential to impact on the trajectory of the pandemic, the Executive have decided that to enable the return of qualification years, remote learning will resume for pre-school/nursery and pupils in P1-3 for the week beginning 22 March until the planned start of the Easter holidays for individual schools.

Pre-school, nursery and primary schools pupils in P1 to P3 will then return to full-time face-to-face teaching after the Easter holidays along with years 12-14.

I recognise that this places additional pressures on schools particularly in implementing the changes, and I am happy to work with schools in particular during March to identify where the additional resources or help may be required prior to the Easter holidays.

I have always sought to be guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognizing the priority the Executive has placed on education, and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term, but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.

I am prioritising the return of pupils in the early years in pre-school and primary school which are vital for children's development and pupils in years 12-14 who are engaged in learning for key qualifications that are vital if they are to have every opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training.

My objective remains to have a full return of all pupils to face to face teaching in school as soon as practicably possible after the Easter break but I recognise this has to be balanced against the public health position. The clear feedback from schools, unions, parents and pupils has been that once a decision is taken to return to school, there should be no further periods of wholesale remote learning. However, I recognize that it may be necessary in limited cases.

Schools are reminded that breakfast clubs, education visits, inter school sports and after school activities should remain paused until at least 12 April or until advised otherwise.

I would emphasise that schools remain a safe environment for our children and the education workforce. In line with guidance from SAGE, all settings are reminded of the need for stringent adherence to the mitigation measures including the bubbling of classes, contained within the Coronavirus Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings [here](#), and New School Day – Pre-School Education Supplementary Guidance [here](#).

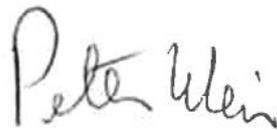
Additional signage will be provided to all schools to encourage everyone to comply with public health messaging. There will be a publicity campaign to promote the use of face

coverings within school settings and on school transport, and spot checks will be carried out at key points along bus routes.

School meal services should be offered for those classes and year groups attending schools. It is likely that schools will require additional resources to manage these different stages of pupils returning and my officials will work with the EA to identify what is required. This may include additional substitute teachers, classroom assistants or administrative support, to alleviate the additional workload burden.

For now Youth Service provision will remain unchanged and I intend to bring a paper to the Executive soon to provide clarity to the service as restrictions more generally ease.

Again I want to thank you for your leadership, commitment and dedication to our children and young people at this difficult time.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Weir". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P'.

Peter Weir, MLA
Minister of Education