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Deputy Rob Ward
Chair, Children, Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel
Scrutiny Office
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07 September 2020

Dear Deputy Ward,

Return of Schools

Thank you for writing to me on 28th August 2020 requesting additional information about the return of schools in September. Please see the below answers to your questions:

1. Apart from the guidance which has been published, has any additional guidance been given to Head Teachers and staff in relation to the return to school. If so, could the Panel have sight of any supporting documentation in confidence at this stage? I would also be grateful if you could confirm how this guidance has been disseminated to all staff.

I have sent under separate cover one email sent to Headteachers on 20th August by the Head of Facilities Management. This provided additional guidance with regards to updating Schools Safety Plans, Risk Assessments and Cleaning Strategies. Headteachers would then manage the onward dissemination of information within their schools as appropriate.

2. Could the Minister confirm the current position in relation to the wearing of face masks in schools, noting of course the position that has recently been adopted by the United Kingdom?

Due to the current low levels of the virus in the Island the public health advice is that the wearing of face coverings in schools is not required. Should the prevalence of the virus in the Island change then this position may be reviewed.

Public Health has recommended that children over the age of 11 wear masks while on school buses to help prevent the risk of transmission. However, the wearing of face masks for school pupils will not be a condition of travel. Wearing a face covering remains a condition of travel on all Liberty Bus network buses for everyone over the age of 11 unless they are medically exempt.

I will continue to receive medical advice on this and other areas of our response to Covid-19 and will take appropriate action as and when required.

3. Will children be given the option to wear face masks if they wish to do so?

If children want to wear a face mask they may do so.

4. What arrangements have been put in place to protect staff who are required to shield for either themselves or a family member?

Staff should continue to adhere to guidance from public health as to their own risk assessment for personal shielding, where applicable. This will be kept under review with Public Health. The current guidance is available at:

<https://www.gov.ie/Health/Coronavirus/PublicHealthGuidance/Pages/ShieldingForVulnerablePeople.aspx>

5. As we progress into the winter months and the likely increase in a variety of illnesses, what policy will be adopted in relation to staff who begin to show symptoms, even those not directly associated with Covid-19?

All staff should be aware of the symptoms of Covid-19 published here:

<https://www.gov.ie/Health/Coronavirus/PublicHealthGuidance/Pages/CoronavirusInformation.aspx#anchor-0>

Any staff displaying symptoms of COVID-19 should not attend a college or school. If, during this period, staff are well enough to do so, and the nature of their role allows, they should work from home. If it isn't possible for staff to work from home, then they will be entitled to receive their normal basic pay.

Over the coming weeks the public health team are planning various public communications to help members of the public distinguish between COVID symptoms and the symptoms of colds so that it is clear when pupils and staff should stay away from the school setting.

6. What consideration has been given to the impact of increased absence rates and attendance of staff if they are required to remain away from schools after developing symptoms? Will staff be placed on attendance plans if they are required to take time away from the school due to showing symptoms?

Increased absence will be covered by colleagues and or supply staff where appropriate in order to maintain normal levels of service. If absence levels are beyond that which can be reasonable covered by alternative available staff partial closures of schools may have to be considered as a last resort.

Sickness absence due to a positive coronavirus test result won't be logged against managing attendance triggers.

7. What approach will the Department be adopting to ensure any members of staff who develop symptoms but test negative for Covid-19 are able to return to the school setting as quickly as possible?

If an individual with symptoms receives a negative PCR test result, the staff member will be advised to stay at home until they feel better.

I trust the above provides the additional information you require, but please do not hesitate to contact me if you require anything further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Tracey Vallois', with a horizontal line underneath.

Senator Tracey Vallois
Minister for Education

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