FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

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Dear Parent/Guardian/Carer

With the return of face to face education for many children commencing on Monday 8 March, I want to thank every parent, guardian and carer for all the hard work you have put in during lockdown supporting the education of our children in what have been very difficult circumstances. I am confident there are brighter days ahead and I look forward to the day when all children can return to school, see their friends and enjoy the excellent education environments we are fortunate to have here.

School Return Arrangements
As you will be aware, on 18 February, the Executive took decisions regarding a phased return to face to face teaching for your children. Pre-school, nursery and pupils in P1-P3 will return on March 8 for two weeks and then return to remote learning until the start of the Easter holiday. Students in years 12 to 14, who will be awarded qualifications this summer, will return to full time face-to-face teaching with effect from 22 March. These arrangements reflect the specific advice received from the Department of Health and the current position of the Executive.

School managed breakfast clubs, education visits, inter-school sports and after school activities will remain paused until advised otherwise. Private providers of breakfast clubs and after school care remain open and are unaffected.

Safety in Schools
I would emphasise that schools remain a safe environment for our children and the education workforce. In line with guidance from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), education settings have been 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.

Curriculum Support
As parents, guardians and carers you may have a variety of concerns about the return to face to face learning. In particular, how to help children recover emotionally while addressing gaps in learning. While there has been disruption to learning, schools will ensure that this is addressed through targeted interventions. The emphasis is on supporting children to build and rebuild positive relationships with their peers and school staff and to engage with learning as they return to the school environment. For

younger pupils in particular there is a need to reconnect, play and have fun again in school.

Older pupils in Years 12-14 have experienced unprecedented disruption to their learning. The Department's priority is to ensure that young people who are taking qualifications in 2021 will not be disadvantaged. Of equal importance is that we maximise learning and teaching time to support young people and give them opportunities to continue to progress and develop prior to teachers completing their grade assessments. I want to reassure you and our young people that these assessments are not external examinations. The CCEA Assessment Resources will be marked by a student's class teacher and, if used, will in most cases be only one piece of a range of evidence used to inform and support teachers' overall assessment. Wherever possible, a range of evidence will inform a teacher's assessment of students' grades.

Face Coverings
Face coverings play an important role in reducing the risk across our communities. DE Policy is that:

- Parents/Guardians/Carers are encouraged to wear face coverings in school grounds and when waiting to collect their children.
- In Primary Schools children are recommended not to use face coverings because of the range of mitigation measures schools have in place and the reduced rate of transmission to and from children of this age.
- Post primary pupils must use face coverings during the routine school day. It is also considered best practice for teachers and support staff to wear face coverings. Schools should also be aware that some persons (including children) are exempt from wearing face coverings and this should be treated sensitively. No one will be excluded from school for failure to have or wear a face covering.
- It is now a legal requirement for all post primary pupils to wear a face covering on dedicated school transport and public transport. Details of the exemptions to this can be found here. All other pupils are strongly recommended to wear a face covering on all school transport if they are able to do so.

I am therefore asking for your help in ensuring that you emphasise to your child the importance of wearing a face covering when required and, in particular, that they wear one when using the home to school transport service.

School Meals
Where pupils are required to attend school, school meals services will operate as normal. Direct payments in place of free school meals will not be made to pupils who are required to attend school.

Free school meals will not be provided to children of key workers and vulnerable children entitled to free school meals when they are at school for supervised learning as their parents will receive a direct payment. Any pupil at school who wishes, including vulnerable children and children of key workers, may purchase a meal where school meals services are operating as normal. Otherwise they should bring a packed lunch.

Post Primary Transfer
Finally, I have also noted concerns about the 2021 transfer tests. Ultimately, any decision to cancel or postpone the tests in the next academic year will be a matter for the private test providers. To date, only AQE Ltd have announced any proposal to

plan towards a test in the next academic year. The Department will continue to engage with the test providers and schools on the arrangements including back up plans and also what modifications they might want to consider to reflect the disruption to the education of young people during the current school year.

Plans for Future return

At this stage I cannot yet confirm a date for the return of children in years 4-7 and years 8-11. However, I am hopeful that as the roll out of the vaccination programme continues and we introduce new regular testing arrangements for the education workforce all children will get back to school soon.

As we move towards normality, I want to fully acknowledge the professionalism and dedication I have seen from our education workforce. I also wish to commend all of you parents, guardians and carers for your patience, hard work and commitment in supporting the education of our children. Last but by no means least, I want to thank our children and young people who have been real heroes throughout this pandemic.

Kind regards

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Peter Weir MLA
Minister of Education