



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 101220
10 December 2020

By email

Dear John

School Christmas and New Year Holidays

I write with regard to the decision by the Scottish Government to decline any national move towards remote learning platforms being deployed around the Christmas and New Year holidays.

To say that your decision, communicated in a letter to the Convenor of the Education and Skills Committee, has disappointed teachers would be an understatement without precedent.

To date this has been a difficult and long session for teachers- as they have coped with the changes, disruptions and stresses of teaching full classes and timetables during the pandemic. Many are exhausted – both physically and emotionally, as I am sure you appreciate, and are looking forward to sharing the Christmas break with family and loved ones. Given the late closure dates of many schools, however, as I have articulated at CERG, there is considerable anxiety that the festive period may be disrupted by late Covid outbreaks in schools and concern for many that infection risk may make unsafe plans such as meeting with elderly relatives.

Some of these worries apply equally to pupils and parents as a need for a pupil to self-isolate over Christmas would be highly disruptive to their families, again as you know from discussions at CERG.

I would draw your attention to advice from the European Commission on staying safe this Christmas, issued on Dec 12th, which states that “In order to reduce transmission risks in the period following the festive season, consider extending school holidays or introducing a period of online learning as a way of introducing a buffer period and avoiding infections to be brought into schools.”

You might argue that you have given the matter consideration and decided against it.

I would ask that you reconsider that position, however. Even the UK Government has taken steps to facilitate December 18th as an inset day: Nick Gibb, "We want there to be six clear days so that by the time we reach Christmas Eve, staff can have a proper break..."

You cite as justification for your decision the advice you received from the Covid-19 Sub-group on Education and Children's Issues. The published paper from this group refers to a "difficult and finely balanced decision" but fails to produce any evidence for its conclusion. It should be noted that there are no teacher voices on this group to advance alternative opinions, which might account for the group's apparent failure to understand the operational norms of school life.

As with CERG the overwhelming majority of those making decisions are working from home, in line with Government advice, and not experiencing on a daily basis the crowded and busy workplace, which is what schools are for teachers. In this circumstance listening to teacher representatives is an imperative.

One argument cited was that students would be safer in school than at home, because of the risk of social mixing. Firstly, the EIS has asked for remote learning to be in place so there would need to be a level of engagement from students in that work, the difference being that they are not in class with up to 32 others plus their teacher and possibly additional other adults, but at home; and secondly, who do the Group think students mix with socially other than their school mates?

In light of the Government decision the EIS is engaging with local authorities on an individual basis. However, we have discovered that most Councils are acting upon a letter from the Director of Learning which appears to suggest that Councils have no locus in this matter unless directed by PHS.

The EIS is clear that a Council's legal duty of care overrides this attempt by the Scottish Government to micro-manage local authorities and we will continue to pursue this matter locally.

The latest Covid data, released today, shows infection levels for 16/17 year olds, per 100,000, to again be ahead of the figure for the general population. Schools may not be driving transmission, but they are not Covid immune and the Scottish Government needs to acknowledge that and act accordingly.

In conclusion, however, I would urge you to reconsider your previous decision and facilitate remote learning for the following purposes:

- To allow staff to feel that they can safely enter a Christmas bubble and safely see or visit family over Christmas;
- To follow Scottish Government advice to limit interactions before forming a Christmas bubble in order to minimise coronavirus infections. (A minimum of a seven-day period between school closure and forming a Christmas bubble could be established, if our request is granted);
- To limit interactions in the 14-day period after the end of the Christmas bubble in order to minimise coronavirus infection upon school buildings re-opening;
- To deliver Scottish Government advice that: *"... every effort is made to ensure that senior leadership teams and school staff get a proper break, and that the likelihood of staff being required to support contact tracing activities over the holiday period is minimised."*

- To convey to teachers that the Scottish Government does, in reality and not just rhetorically, care about their wellbeing.

I am, of course, open to further discussion on this matter.

Yours sincerely

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 prominent 'F'.

Larry Flanagan
General Secretary