



The Educational
Institute of Scotland

Mr John Swinney
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for
Education and Skills
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

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03 August 2020

Dear John

Following an EIS Executive meeting on Friday July 31st, which considered the First Minister's statement to Parliament on July 30th, I have been instructed to write to you in order to raise some significant concerns regarding the now published Guidelines for the reopening of schools, and related matters.

You will recall that I raised at the CERG meeting of July 24th, the EIS view that whilst the Guidelines represented the generality of where agreement was possible, they nonetheless fell short from an EIS perspective in significant areas – the key one of which was the exhortation to move to smaller classes to support physical distancing where possible, without specification as to how that was to be done.

The inherent contradiction in urging such a significant mitigation but failing completely to instruct its implementation is a major concern.

The EIS notes the advice from the SAGE Education sub-group on physical distancing amongst children, not required, but is unconvinced that this represents the safest way in which to reopen schools – an ambition we share with Scottish Government but one which should be realised with the strongest mitigations possible in place and erring on the side of caution particularly where there is conflicting or emerging evidence in relation to the behaviour of the virus and its capacity for transmission among and by children and young people.

These should include specific physical distancing guidelines for pupils. The EIS would argue for this approach across all sectors but even the SAGE sub-group acknowledges that for senior pupils there is an obvious increased risk, given that we are dealing with young adults rather than children. This concern relates not only to the health of staff members but also to these students, many of whom will be worried about potentially taking the virus back into their homes where there may be vulnerable members of their family unit.

We would urge an urgent reconsideration of the physical distancing rules. We would ask, also, for an updated science report on this area, given that the previous paper was

published mid-July and, as we know, knowledge about the virus is constantly developing. How is the Scottish Government monitoring global information on the role of children and schools in relation to potential virus transmission?

If it is to be argued that smaller classes are not possible because of either staffing constraints or accommodation challenges, I would simply ask what has happened to the 3,500 retired teachers willing to return to the classroom or to the use of property beyond the school estate?

We welcome the ring-fenced funding for additional teachers, and hope that this will provide employment for NQTS, RQTS and those on supply lists but genuine Education Recovery will need more.

This is about resource and ambition.

The second area which the Executive wished to raise was that of testing. The triple level of monitoring proposed is welcome and within that there is a clear capacity to operate Test and Protect and to have an overview of schools. What is missing is the more personal level of access to regular pre-symptom testing, which for many teachers would act as an on-going health reassurance. We would urge that further consideration be given to a more proactive approach to supporting teacher and staff confidence that they are working in Covid-secure schools, by providing asymptomatic access to regular testing.

The third area of concern is around the apparent contradictions in how schools should operate compared to health directives in broader society e.g. the mandatory use of face coverings in shops and on public transport, the deployment of plastic screens to create barriers between cashiers, receptionists and members of the public, etc. yet the absence of similar mitigations in schools.

You should be aware that the Executive agreed to survey members on these issues, planned for this week, and we would hope that further mitigations can be agreed and facilitated based on what teachers say is needed.

Finally, I wish to raise the issue of teachers who have been shielding for the past three or four months under Scottish Government direction, and who are now concerned that next week they could be back in front of a full class of pupils. This seems to be an enormous leap and one which does not sit well with the First Minister's warning to those who had been shielding until August 1st, about continuing to be especially cautious.

I realise that the Guidelines allow for a bespoke risk assessment to be undertaken, and that these will be clinically based, but in many instances such an approach may not factor in the impact of prolonged shielding on the anxiety levels of individuals and we feel that this should be underlined by the Guidance in relation to those who have been shielding or who are vulnerable in other ways.

The EIS welcomes the fact that Scotland appear to have successfully suppressed the virus at this point in time; however, we would not wish to see the reopening of schools act as a catalyst to a resurgence. That means we must ensure that school buildings are

Covid-secure environments. Across the globe we are witnessing how quickly things can deteriorate.

Teachers, pupils, and parents have every reason to be anxious about schools reopening. Addressing the concerns raised in this letter would go some way to offering reassurance.

As ever, we are open to further discussion on these matters.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Larry Flanagan". The letters are cursive and connected, with a distinct downward stroke at the end of the word "Flanagan".

Larry Flanagan
General Secretary