



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on
the COVID-19 Response

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Statement: Education

6 January 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)

Mr Jim Allister

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Mrs Rosemary Barton

Mr Maurice Bradley

Ms Paula Bradshaw

Ms Nicola Brogan

Mr Robbie Butler

Mr Gerry Carroll

Mr Colm Gildernew

Mr Paul Givan

Mr William Humphrey

Mr Chris Lyttle

Mr Daniel McCrossan

Mr Patsy McGlone

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Justin McNulty

Ms Karen Mullan

Mr Mike Nesbitt

Mr Robin Newton

Mr John O'Dowd

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Mr Christopher Stalford

Ms Claire Sugden

Mr Peter Weir

Mr Jim Wells

Miss Rachel Woods

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I welcome the Minister of Education to this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. I invite him to make his statement, which should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Executive have correctly sought to prioritise education and the needs of our young people. Any disruption to schooling, for a significant period of time, will have a devastating impact on children's educational opportunities and future prospects, as well as damaging their mental health and well-being.

No matter how well-managed or provided, removal of face-to-face learning and its replacement with remote learning impacts on children's educational experience with a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged groups and vulnerable children. It should, therefore, only be contemplated as a last resort in extreme public health circumstances, such as we are facing, and should be maintained for a period no longer than is necessary.

I brought forward a range of measures in education settings, aimed at curbing the spread of COVID, in Assembly statements on 21 and 31 December 2020. Those were produced following discussions with the Department of Health and were cognisant of the requirement that schools could not reopen as normal in January. They included measures making face coverings compulsory in classroom settings in post-primary schools, increased enforcement of face coverings on school transport, work with the Department of Health on widening the usage of test and tracing within schools, improved visibility of signage to parents on school gates, and targeted messaging to young people. Work has proceeded on those measures and they will be ready to be implemented before any resumption of schools.

More significantly, a package of measures has been introduced with regard to periods of remote learning. The measures were legally enacted on 3 January. They specifically required all mainstream schools and post-primary schools to conduct remote learning for pupils for the first week of term — from 4 to 8 January. Post-primary schools were given some flexibility for face-to-face revision classes for the first week of term for students sitting GCSE exams in the second week of term. Pupils in years 8 to 11 were to receive remote learning until the end of January. Vulnerable children and children of key workers, where at least one parent is a key worker, were to be facilitated at school for supervised learning. Special schools were to reopen on the usual dates and remain open. Preschool education settings were to reopen on the usual dates and remain open. Childcare was to remain open and examinations were required to be compliant with public health regulations.

In light of the current crisis in public health, the following necessary actions, which were agreed yesterday by the Executive, are proposed. The decision does not suggest that schools are no longer safe places for young people; instead, limiting attendance is about reducing the number of contacts that all of us have with people from other households.

Effective immediately, all mainstream education providers, including preschool education settings, primary and post-primary schools, are required to provide remote learning at home to their pupils rather than face-to-face teaching until the half-term break in the middle of February. Vulnerable children and children of key workers will have access to schools for supervised learning. Vulnerable children include, amongst others, all children with statements of special educational needs. Children of key workers require at least one parent to be a key worker. Those are the same provisions that were put in place during the first lockdown and resulted, on that occasion, in a relatively small uptake of places. Remote learning requirements and the removal of face-to-face teaching should be temporary and will last no longer than necessary, and therefore will be kept under review by the Executive. Special schools are to remain open as usual. I have also agreed that provision in lieu of free school meals will be made to children who are entitled to free school meals while normally in school. Childcare settings, including those based in primary schools, are to remain open, and childminders are also allowed to continue their provision.

I have constantly said that my priority is to ensure that, if possible, exams will go ahead as planned. My overriding aim, however, is to ensure that our students are not disadvantaged in terms of their qualifications compared with learners in other jurisdictions and that we take account of the rapidly changing context in which our schools and pupils are having to operate. We must also provide equity between students completing exams under different examination boards from different jurisdictions.

I have previously stated that we are preparing for all eventualities. I have asked CCEA to take work forward so that plans are ready to be activated in relation to the 2021 examination series, should they be required. I now feel that we have reached a point where, although I still believe that examinations are the most appropriate and fairest awarding methodology, with a further six weeks of remote learning having to be imposed, we cannot continue with exams in the way that was planned. I have, therefore, decided that all GCSE, AS and A2 exams that are due to take place in January, February, May and June will be cancelled. Work will continue on the alternative awarding arrangements, and further details will be brought forward as soon as possible.

Generic youth provision will move online under the discretion of management committees, and the Education Authority (EA) Youth Service will continue to lead on targeted provision for vulnerable and at-risk young people, including limited face-to-face work, with mitigations in place to limit the spread of

the virus, where that is deemed appropriate and to provide support under existing protocols to the PSNI.

I reiterate that these decisions have not been taken lightly, but we must have regard to the prevailing public health situation and the need to reduce overall community contacts. I wish to see schools returning to face-to-face learning as soon as the public health situation permits.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I thank the Minister for making his statement. I now invite members to ask the Minister questions. I will allow a period of around one hour for that. There will be an opportunity for supplementary questions. It is my intention to allow all members who wish to ask a question to do so, but that depends on the cooperation of all members who speak; obviously, I appeal, once again, for people to put focused and succinct questions to the Minister, and I also invite the Minister to be as succinct as possible in his responses. The Chair of the Committee for Education will, as always, be allowed a little more latitude than other members in asking his questions.

Mr Lyttle (Committee Chair - Committee for Education): Since May 2020, the Education Committee and the Assembly have called on the Education Minister and selective schools to set out a contingency to post-primary transfer. We all knew that it was entirely possible that testing would be disrupted by the pandemic this year — not by any political party, but by a pandemic. What children, parents and teachers have been put through by the Education Minister and some selective schools in relation to post-primary transfer is not acceptable. It is clearly not possible for testing to take place this year. I have been open on the alternative to the Minister, the Department of Education admission criteria recommended to all publicly funded schools, so I ask the Education Minister and selective schools who wish to add academic selection to this criteria to set out now the safe and fair academic criteria that you would use when testing is not possible.

Mr Weir: I am open to any suggestions that are put forward. Let me make it clear that, first, schools were written to and were written to some ago. There is a deadline for all schools to produce any criteria that they are producing by 2 February, and it is up to schools to set their own criteria. There is no easy way of doing academic selection without some form of test. The member seems to be able to judge ahead of what the public health position will be in, for example, two months' time and what public health mitigations can be put in place. I want children to have the opportunity to apply for and, indeed, have a fair chance of getting a place at the school that they want.

Again, I am open to suggestions on this, but, ultimately, the problem is that there is no clear and obvious way that academic selection can take place without some form of test. Without that in the criteria, all criteria will have a level of unfairness towards one pupil or another. It depends, in many ways, for example, on what your family links are with the school, whether you have a sibling at the school, for instance, or whether you have a teacher who is connected with the school. It can depend on your proximity to the school. The problem is that, whatever criteria are used, there is, clearly, a problem in terms of fairness. There is no perfect solution within that. I am open to any particular suggestions in which academic selection can be used, but let us not crystal-gaze about what the position will be on any level of mitigation that can be put in place for the end of February. These are private organisations that put forward the proposals, but anything that is done has got to be in line with public health mitigations.

Mr Lyttle: Minister, I respectfully say that you cannot keep washing your hands of this urgent situation. We have the absurdity that children and young people will gain admission to university without an exam and you insist that there will be a possibility to sit tests for 10-year-olds. You need to move on; you need to put forward solutions.

Minister, GCSE, AS and A-level pupils have also been put through unacceptable distress this year, so I also ask the Education Minister to set out now the alternative arrangements for GCSE, AS and A-level grading this year and to seek his assurance that there will be no repeat of the grading fiasco over which he ministered in the summer of 2020.

Mr Weir: Happy New Year to the member as well. In terms of university places, there will be options because of the fact that there is a much greater level of data in schools that can be used to generate grades. That is not the same position across the board in primary schools, so we are not comparing like with like.

The member referred to some of the difficulties that we faced in 2020, where things had to be done very quickly. Indeed, across the board in different jurisdictions, problems arose. I am determined to try

to make sure that those do not happen, which is why we have been working with CCEA, which has been working on contingency arrangements. Those will be produced as soon as they are feasible, but it is also the case that we need to make sure that these are got absolutely right. We could simply produce something off the shelf that is rushed and would be fine for the Assembly to hear today, but, if that is got wrong, that will have a devastating impact on children's education. I am committed to ensuring that detailed proposals will be brought forward in the next couple of weeks, that can be brought to the Assembly before the end of January, which will cover those situations. However, it is more important that we get this right, rather than getting it immediately.

Mr Newton: I welcome the Minister's attendance in the Assembly today. I think that this has been three times in three weeks, if my judgement is right. I welcome that the Executive have correctly sought to prioritise education. Minister, the Engage programme —.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Sorry, will the member use the microphone?

Mr Newton: Do you want me to start again, Mr Speaker?

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Newton: On the Engage programme, I understand that it was well received and is regarded as being a valuable initiative. Under these circumstances, will the Engage programme continue and is there funding for it to continue?

Mr Weir: There will be exploration into whether there are different ways that certain things can be implemented. I will give a reassurance, and let me put it on two levels. As well as the direct impact on children, the Engage programme drew in, for instance, additional support from people on the substitute list and provided that additional level of support. The disruption that is going to happen with regard to face-to-face teaching is clearly not the fault of, or anything to do with, those who are involved with that programme. Therefore, anybody who has been hired under that programme will continue to receive the support. Indeed, if there have been any substitute bookings, those will also be honoured with funding. On a wider level, I have already tasked officials to seek either direct support from DOF or to see whether money can be reprioritised.

During the last lockdown, we had the situation that, over a sustained period of three months, substitute teachers effectively fell between two stools: they were not able to be paid and were not able, in those circumstances, to be furloughed in the same way as other workers. Therefore, I think that it is only right that similar arrangements to those that were in place in the spring be repeated with a fund for substitute teachers. Consequently, we are seeking to ensure that, during the six-week period, a similar level of provision is made for substitute teachers.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. To clarify, Minister, are you indicating that there is money in the current budget that could be reprioritised, or does there need to be an application to the Finance Minister? Since the Executive have correctly sought to prioritise education, do you anticipate that money will come forward to support the recruitment of substitute teachers?

Mr Weir: I am tempted to say that, for the benefit of anybody who is relaying this to the Finance Minister, the Department of Education obviously has no money and it could do with extra money at all times. However, with regard to the COVID allocations, we are in a scenario where there will probably be some level of reprioritisation. That is because a situation in which schools are operating fully is different to a situation in which schools are operating on a much more limited basis for a small number of children over a six-week period, so there is some headroom.

There is a situation across the board — different Departments will have faced this — where, in the allocation of money, a lot of it had to be based on estimates, meaning that there is an opportunity for movement within that. Sometimes, the pressures are greater than anticipated and, sometimes, you will err on the side of caution, with not all of the provision being used up. Therefore, it is a question of whether this can be met by reallocations or, alternatively, through additional funding that is sought through the monitoring rounds or from additional COVID money. So I will be open to that.

That is not simply on the substitute teacher issue, but applies to other aspects. We face a fast-changing situation, which means that priorities will have to change at times, and I am keen to move with those changes.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his statement. In the context of the grave and growing public health threat, it is essential that the Assembly and the Executive send out a clear and uncomplicated "Stay at home" message. The change to remote learning is about saving lives and protecting our health service and the health of children and staff working in schools. Today, I have a very relieved 16-year-old, so I welcome the Minister's decision to cancel GCSE, AS and A-level examinations. Does the Minister accept that the intention of AQE to proceed with the transfer test is entirely inconsistent with that decision and that the transfer test needs to be cancelled?

Mr Weir: No, I do not accept that. Again, there is a wide divergence of views, and that is probably no great surprise to the member. I believe that it is right that there is an opportunity for academic selection. That has to be in the context of the fact that any action taken, be it a test or any action that any of us takes, has to be in line with public health guidelines. It should be noted that what we are putting in place today from the point of view of education takes us up to the middle of February. The wider Executive position on other issues and the regulations will take us up to 6 February. This clearly goes beyond that, so I disagree with the member.

I reiterate that, because of the very dire situation that we are in from a public health point of view, this is about every sector and every one of us across the board taking actions to minimise the spread. Largely speaking, while nowhere is risk-free, in general, there is relatively low risk in schools. What has been the case with education — I think that, if pressed on it, a lot of the medical people would say this — is that it is not so much about what happens directly within school walls but what happens outside them, because of the range of consequential behavioural actions, with parents being much more free to move about, children getting to and from school and increased levels of socialisation. It is about the knock-on effect. We are in such a dire position, so every action needs to contribute to addressing that.

I add one final appeal on the ability of society to get children back into school — this comes back to a point that Mr O'Dowd made last week — and that is that there is a role for all of us. An element of the spread of virus is because of irresponsible behaviour. People who are engaged in irresponsible behaviour need to take a good, hard look at themselves and look at the consequences not just for themselves but for others.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his answers. I have to say that I found AQE's actions yesterday irresponsible as well.

Minister, you gave an update on when you hope to bring forward proposals on alternative awarding arrangements. I know that BTECs are not within your control, but many post-primary students take BTECs, and there are students sitting BTEC exams today. Does the Minister know when those students will receive clarity on the arrangements for 2021?

Mr Weir: I know that some of the awarding organisations have been in touch with schools. I know that some BTECs are done through further education colleges and some are done through schools. There has been communication, I understand, with the schools that provide those. My understanding is that, generally speaking, vocational qualifications are done largely on a national basis. I think that a lot of students are at a point where it would seriously damage their position if exams were cancelled at this very late stage. My understanding is that vocational qualifications, although they are outside my remit, will go ahead. That is different from the situation as regards GCSEs, AS levels and A levels. I can surmise from what I know of things, but they are obviously not directly within my remit.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for his statement today. Minister, in your statement, you stated:

"we are preparing for all eventualities."

You then went on to say:

"Work will continue on the alternative awarding arrangements, and further details will be brought forward as soon as possible."

That means that you are not prepared and that you have contradicted yourself in your own statement. The later you make decisions, the less time teachers have to prepare our children for what is to come and the less accurate deliberations about grade awards will be. Do you now accept that your last-minute approach has significantly contributed to the confusion and stress so evident amongst our

young people and their parents? Furthermore, will you accept that your approach will hamper the process of enabling our young people to get grades that accurately reflect their ability?

Mr Weir: No.

Mr McCrossan: Really disappointing. No sign of any empathy whatsoever. Young people are being hugely let down and have been put under an immense amount of strain, pressure and stress and so too have been their parents. Minister, will you apologise to our young people, parents, school staff and teachers who have been left hanging in the balance as a result of your indecision, your inaction and waiting to jump to London's tune, once again?

Mr Weir: Sorry, look, this should be a serious day in which people do not play to the gallery. I think the member has a little bit of a tendency to do that too often, I have to say. Look, the position is that we are in a fast-evolving situation. As such, as things stand at the moment — although I suspect that they will be overtaken by events — our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland are currently still in the position that schools will actually go back on Monday, for instance. There is a range of actions that has been taken.

It is undoubtedly the case that great changes were made to our examination process, that, had examinations been able to go ahead, would have been fair and generous to our students, taking account of the situation. It is clear that, given the levels of disruption that would be happening with remote learning, but also actually ensuring that there is equity and parity for all our students, that we are left with this suboptimal situation. It is the case that some time ago I tasked CCEA to produce contingency arrangements. It is important, because we are ultimately still in a certain level of uncharted territory, to ensure that those are got right. Consequently, it is more important that if this takes another couple of weeks to be able to get it right, let us get it right. I appreciate the need for swift action and for certainty, as much as possible, but that cannot be at the expense of mistakes being made and this being got wrong, because if it is got wrong it impacts on students' lives for years to come. I reiterate that it is critical that this is got right.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his earlier comments with regard to his openness to options and ideas with regard to the transfer test. I put it on notice that I will supply you with something later today once I have topped and tailed the suggestion, and I would ask the House to consider the option.

Minister, with regard to special educational needs, special schools and vulnerable children it is good to note that the provision for education will be there. Many of us will be faced with emails — I am sure that you will be too — from staff who work in those settings, whether they be teachers, support staff or bus drivers. Are you confident that every mitigation and every possible safety measure has been taken? Is there anything that we can do to further protect those people to keep those centres open for those children who have the greatest need?

Mr Weir: The other thing that you will see from much of the scientific advice is that it will indicate that, in terms of teachers, everywhere has some level of risk, but for instance whether it is locally in Northern Ireland, or nationally across the UK or on a Europe-wide basis, the evidence clearly suggests that the level of positive tests amongst teachers or education staff is no different from the community as a whole. There does not appear to be an additional risk, on that basis.

Similarly, while there have been considerable cases of transfer between children and transfer between adults there is very little evidence of a great deal of any form of transfer between children and staff and vice versa.

In terms of provision of any safety measure, we will always work alongside Public Health to make sure that absolutely anything that can be done, will be done. If that means any form of additional equipment or measures, there is very much an openness to that. It is also the case that, even with the new variant, which is not at this stage certainly prevalent in Northern Ireland, it is not that there is a particular additional measure which will prevent that. That is not the nature of the variant, for instance. Any action that can be taken certainly is open to being taken.

I think that what is likely to happen as well, even in special schools, as we found in the last lockdown situation, is that a lot of families, facing those circumstances, will simply keep their children at home. I anticipate that even in special schools the number attending to be much less than what it would normally be, but it is vital for a range of children, some because parents rely on that interaction, particularly from the more medical point of view of what happens in the special school and some

because of the condition of the child that they need routine. It is critical that those remain open, which is why, above everything else, those have been prioritised and I think that is probably something that is happening in other jurisdictions as well.

Mr Butler: I urge the Minister to keep a close eye on that sector at the moment and to ensure that every precaution is taken. Also welcome is the news with regard to preschool education settings and nurseries and those closures. I know that the sector is incredibly grateful for that news.

There is a push towards online and blended learning for all sectors, even preschools and nurseries. Would there be a commitment from you and the Department to ensure that the money is there for any further roll-out of equipment, broadband issues or any technicalities?

Mr Weir: There is still availability of tablets. We put in a bid, I think, which may be at the Finance stage, for additional equipment.

With online learning, it is generally acknowledged that the younger you go, the more difficult that direct engagement is. Guidance has been developed for online learning. We want to work with link officers and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to ensure that online learning is consistent.

There can be a barrier for some families with regard to the device or broadband, and work has been done on that. However, the problems of remote learning and the disadvantages compared with face-to-face teaching, go way beyond that. The reality is that there is a range of children who will respond best only when physically in a classroom, and that is one of the difficulties. That is why, although the steps are necessary, this is a sad day for education and for our young people. It is a worrying day as we move ahead over the next few weeks.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, I have written to you on the many concerns about special schools. Why did the Minister take the decision to keep special schools open and what measures will he put in place to protect the health and safety of teachers, auxiliary staff, classroom assistants and so on in special schools in the weeks to come?

Mr Weir: We will take any measures that are necessary. The problem with any additional protection in schools is that a limited amount can be done. We are open to any suggestions and will work with public health in relation to that. If a simple action could be taken to provide additional protection, it would have been taken. To be honest, a limited amount can be done additionally in schools.

In terms of keeping special schools open, it is important, given their vulnerability, to protect many of the children in special schools and their families. I expect that, during a lockdown, particularly with a lot of parents now working from home and staying at home, many parents of special educational needs children may well want to have their child at home, and that might be the best solution for them. However, we need to have a scenario, particularly for those who need and want it, for example those who are severely autistic and for whom routine is critical, that allows for those children to be catered for.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answer. I ask the Minister, his departmental officials and the EA to keep those health and safety measures to the forefront of their minds as we go forward.

I pay tribute to principals, teachers, classroom assistants and all who work in education, including governors, who have had to make difficult decisions in recent months. Clarity and communication of message is absolutely important. Will the Minister continue to work with principals, teachers, the EA, his Department and trade union representatives in education to ensure that the message is out there, there is clarity in that message, people feel that they are being listened to and that information is passed on?

Mr Weir: I join in paying tribute to all those who have contributed in school settings. Sometimes, the thing that is forgotten about in education are the parents. We focus a lot on teachers and what is happening in schools, but parents can play a virtuous role. At times, we have seen some who have maybe not behaved in the most responsible fashion, and there will be issues around messaging to parents. However, there is a critical role for parents to play. I appreciate that they will probably have a much more stressful time as we move ahead, so it is important that they are a key part of the conversation.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, you have told the House on several occasions that you have no power in relation to the transfer tests. Yet and all, your Department was co-joined in the judicial review in regard to moving the transfer tests and the challenge to the transfer tests. Your Department resolved that case by coming forward and saying that you could accommodate another date, which indicates that you have legal powers. Will you use your powers to prevent, on health grounds, the transfer tests going ahead this year?

Mr Weir: Anything that happens will have to be compliant with public health, but, no, I will not move in simply to follow an ideological route. As the Member said, yes, we were joined in a case. It may well be that we are a more litigious society, but I have to say that my experience in the Department of Education is that, at any one time, the Department or me personally tend to be joined in about 10 or a dozen judicial reviews. It does not necessarily mean that I have a power.

Once we reach the point at which there is a transfer process, the Department, working alongside the EA, does the processing side of it. The issue is the timescale under which transfer must take place. Essentially, our role is to make sure that, come 1 September, everybody has a place in a school. As, I am sure, the member, as a previous Minister, will be aware, that is a lengthy process that has a number of steps. Our role is to make sure that those steps take place. From a timing point of view, given the point at which results would have been available, could those have been accommodated in November? Yes. Could the arranging of those tests be accommodated in January? Yes, it could be. Our role was not to give a date but simply to say, "Is this something that is actually doable from that point of view?", and, yes, it was.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, on this occasion, my ideological stance is the protection of the health and well-being of the children, parents and staff who will have to go through the transfer procedure. I wear my opposition to academic selection as a badge of honour — I have no qualms about saying that at all — but it is not about that on this occasion. This morning, we had the mental health champion calling for the tests to be suspended and stopped. We have had the Children's Commissioner calling for the tests to be stopped. Will you use article 101 of the 1986 Education and Libraries Order to stop tests this year?

Mr Weir: The short answer is no. Look, all these things will be judged according to public health. However, with the best will in the world and whatever badge people seem to be wearing, there is clearly a strong and concerted effort simply to cancel academic selection. Let us not beat about the bush: that is clearly the case. I support the right of schools to have academic selection, and I support academic selection. Without it, there is a range of children who would never have the opportunity to go to schools.

Let me bring this back to a personal basis *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Order, members.

Mr Weir: Let me bring this back to a personal basis. I look at my parents' generation, who did not have the opportunity. My late father and mother, both intelligent individuals, did not have that opportunity. I did not have an older brother, so, if the criterion had been whether you had an older sibling at the school, I may well not have been able to go to the school that I went to. I got the opportunity because of academic selection. I will not tell the next generation, "Your opportunity to go to the school that you want to go to is destroyed because of something that you have absolutely no control over".

Now, it may well be that, given the public health situation, things cannot happen. Ultimately, that is a judgement that will have to be made at a much later date. However, as much as possible, I will not be the one stopping academic selection or, indeed, facilitating the ultimate destruction of the grammar schools and, more importantly, the life chances of our young people in getting to those schools *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Keep order in the Chamber, please.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for coming to the House and making the statement. What preparations are the Department putting in place to ensure that teachers, assistants etc will receive vaccination and that the Department, in association with the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency (PHA), will give education providers priority in any vaccination programme being rolled out?

Mr Weir: I thank the member for that question. I have made it fairly clear that I support movement towards earlier vaccinations for teachers. There is a strong argument, particularly, taking on board a point that Mr Humphrey made, in relation to whether anything could be done for special schools. I entirely accept that, if we are looking at the most vulnerable in our society, such as the over-80s, clearly, anyone who is in employment will not be ahead in the queue. To be fair to the Health Minister, it is not a decision that lies within his remit but is taken on a UK-wide basis by the joint vaccinations group. I would like to see a UK-wide decision being taken that would create greater prioritisation for teachers because that is key to ensuring that schools reopen, remain open and can sustain that position. That debate will be had in the Executive and beyond.

Mr M Bradley: It is important that all efforts are made to ensure the health and safety of education providers and students. I urge the Minister to take that forward with the UK Government as soon as possible.

Mr Weir: I am very much at one with the member on that point of view. Representations via the Executive will, ultimately, be made at the UK-wide level. I know that other jurisdictions have a similar position. Again, there is a balance to be struck because, as I have said, we must ensure that the most vulnerable are looked after, but there is an important role for prioritisation. If improvements can be made with regard to what happens for teachers, that must be taken into account as we move ahead. We have seen that to some extent with regard to the clinical bit and trying to roll out the vaccine as much as possible. If we go back a week or two ago, a decision was taken that the best way in which to do that was, essentially, to have people in certain tranches moving through the two doses in one go. It is now recognised, although I appreciate that there is a level of medical divergence on the issue, that, with regard to the pure practicalities and mechanics of getting the maximum number of people vaccinated, giving a single dose first up and trying to roll out as many of those as possible within the next number of weeks is the best way forward. It shows that the position on prioritisation is not immutable in that regard. It is likely that whatever is done will happen only on a broader, UK-wide basis. However, I think that there is a strong argument to be made for it.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Before I call the next member, I remind you that we are well into the time for this session. I invite the Minister to reflect on making some of his responses more succinct. That applies to everybody when asking their questions. Otherwise, they will be kept back to do 1,000 lines.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for his statement. There has been a distinct lack of contingency planning by the Education Minister to date, which has fuelled uncertainty at critical times throughout the pandemic. Given that we are now entering six weeks of remote learning, what will he do with that time to ensure that schools can safely resume face-to-face learning when the situation allows it?

Mr Weir: Principally, I will take whatever measures are needed. Since 31 December, we have worked on a range of issues. For instance, the direct indications that we sent out to schools for when there is resumption — indeed, had there been resumption this week — include the requirement for face coverings for secondary-school pupils. We have worked with the EA to ensure that there is greater monitoring and spot checks on buses with regard to face coverings. We are working with Health on test and trace, although, if schools are not physically present, we will roll that forward. We have worked on and already signed off signage to go outside schools. Part of the issue — this was raised by the Chief Scientific Adviser, for instance — has been what happens around the school gates. We want to have clear-cut signage that reminds people about their actions. We are also reminding staff that, while, for example, face coverings are not being made compulsory, if they feel that something would be of value to them directly in the classroom, that has been permitted from day one. We want to encourage that. If there is any opportunity when people need face coverings, those can be provided.

To be honest, if we are looking at full resumption, I think that there is a very limited additional amount that can be done in the school buildings. The critical element of this is the broader element of what is happening in the community. Again, there is not a great deal of evidence of this having spread very fast in schools. It is being brought into schools by the community and taken out to the community. If there are any further actions, working with colleagues, that can be taken to tighten up what happens in the schools, we will be more than happy to do it.

Ms Brogan: In that case, Minister, will you commit to engaging in a proper consultation process with teaching unions and other representative bodies to ensure that their concerns around the health and safety of school settings are not only fairly considered but acted on in advance of schools reopening?

Mr Weir: We will always engage with trade unions, for example, prior to the statement on 31 December; indeed, there was contact made today on the examination side of it as well. We will always work with them. I think that the problem is that, beyond what is being done there — ultimately, everything can be considered — it does not appear that any of the other suggestions would directly lead to full resumption. Some of the suggestions are around, for example, ensuring that there is a two-metre distance between each child in the classroom. That would mean that you would probably only have about a quarter of the children in at any one time. If it is on the basis of a range of rotations, all these things would involve, at best, a level of blended learning. That means that a considerable amount of remote learning would continue. All those things have to be taken into account if we want to do the maximum. The best solution is to reach a point where we can have all our children back in school all the time, because anything less is suboptimal.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement and, like others, applaud his move on examinations, albeit that it was a decision that was made kicking and screaming.

Minister, special schools will remain open. Childcare will remain open. Schools for children with special educational needs, vulnerable children and at-risk children will remain open, and schools will remain open for children of key workers. So they should; I applaud that. However, teachers and principals in special schools feel that they have been left behind. I speak on behalf of brilliant schools in my constituency such as Lisanally and Carrickore. They feel, to a certain extent, that their roles are not as protected as others. What additional mitigations, additional resource and additional support and guidance have you provided to those schools and to childcare settings to ensure that pupils and staff in those settings are all safe in the coming weeks?

Mr Weir: There will be specific messaging that will go out to special schools, but the reality is that a lot of the measures that were taken in schools are taken in special schools. There is no magic trick to the virus that means that one measure will be taken in one location and a different one in another. Clearly, as indicated — I welcome the member's applause, for once, for something that I have done — the reason why special schools are singled out is the vulnerable nature of the children. That is why those children need a particular level of protection. Now, I anticipate that it is likely that the number of children going through the doors will be an awful lot lower. That seems to be a likely consequence of lockdown; we certainly saw that the last time round, and I think it is important. We will provide whatever support is needed. I do not think, to be honest, that there is a great deal that is massively resource-driven. If there is something where additional money can be spent, we will be happy to spend it. I do not think that there is a magic solution, if you like, that, if only X amount more were spent on it, would sort out a particular problem. It is about trying to make sure that whatever is needed is available, and we will do everything within our powers to do that.

Mr McNulty: I have taken time to listen to teachers, parents, pupils and staff. They are all really concerned about the widening education gap and the impact on children's mental, emotional and physical health. They are really worried about children falling further behind. Will the Minister agree to bring forward a comprehensive recharge programme that goes way above and beyond the one that has already been discussed, a programme that helps children recover emotionally, mentally, physically and academically; that lets kids catch up; that recharges their mental health; and that recharges them emotionally and in terms of their social skills and their physical health, as well as academically? Will you bring forward a comprehensive programme to put that in place?

Mr Weir: I wonder whether the member is being sponsored by a company called Recharge; he seems to have worked that name in on a couple of occasions.

Not only will I do that; I have done it. That is why, for instance, we got funding from the Executive for the Engage programme, which is about academic catch-up. It is why £5 million in COVID funding has been allocated to mental health and well-being engagement. So, yes, an additional amount has been done. If additional money needs to be spent — *[Interruption.]* The member seems to be denying reality, but that has been —

Mr McNulty: Six pence per child a day is not enough.

Mr Weir: Perhaps the member should have a word with the Executive to carve out many more millions in relation to that. There is a limit to what can be done. When it comes to academic support by way of the Engage programme, we can draw down part of that for substitute cover etc. There is a finite number of people who are physically able to do that. The measures that we have taken to draw down those amounts have probably gone further than most other jurisdictions have gone. Clearly, if more

money is available, that would be welcome, but those are fairly large programmes. A strong level of support has been provided, not just by me but with the support of the whole Executive.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister made it clear that he believes that examinations are a necessary test for pupils. Given that the pandemic has provided a very severe test of the Executive and Ministers, what score does he give himself out of 10?

Mr Weir: Evaluation is one thing and self-evaluation is always a fairly ropery concept. Rather than trying to self-evaluate in the middle of a pandemic, I prefer to concentrate on the task at hand and get ahead with that.

Mr Nesbitt: Let me put it to the Minister in another way, then. There are many people who are not happy with him and would probably like to echo the words of Oliver Cromwell when he dismissed the Rump Parliament in 1653:

"In the name of God, go!"

Mr Weir: It is good to see that, at this critical point, the member's approach is so constructive. That is a cheap shot.

A wide range of views are considered whenever decisions are taken. There has been reaction on both sides to almost every decision that I have taken. I prefer to concentrate on delivering for children and trying to do the best that I possibly can. I may not be able to reach the Olympian heights of my colleague from Strangford but, working in the foothills, I will try to do the best that I can.

Mr Buckley: I have watched with concern the level of political point-scoring from some in the Chamber on our schools throughout COVID-19, as Mr McCrossan and Mr Lyttle jockey for position in supremacy and vanity on the Education Committee as to who can be the most anti-education member on it.

Today, at my request, the Chief Scientific Adviser confirmed to the Health Committee that he would be commissioning scientific evidence of the impact on the health and well-being of our young people as a result of further moves to close schools and move to remote learning. As a Minister who supports the core tenet of education, which is face-to-face learning, will he give his assessment as to the devastating impact that that has had on young people across this country?

Mr Weir: I welcome the Chief Scientific Adviser's remarks and any action that he is taking in relation to that assessment. Sometimes, people quote selectively from SAGE papers but some of those papers that I have seen highlight very clearly that any school closures come with a very damaging impact on young people. It is undoubtedly the case that there is an impact on their mental health and well-being. That is why, across the board, I and the Executive do not take our decisions lightly. A situation where young people are, effectively, locked down for the next six weeks, will be damaging to their mental health and well-being. Sadly, in some cases, it may be fatal, and that is a very grave consequence that needs to be taken into account. That is why our health professionals have always said that there is a certain level of a balancing act within this. It is about the impact it has on COVID, but also the damage that it causes to the academic future and life chances of our young people and the health risk that closures cause. It is why anything that is done has to be done with the greatest level of reluctance.

Mr Buckley: I will go further: closures run the risk of destroying young people's life chances for a generation. Can the Minister explain the rationale behind the closure of preschools and playgroups where remote learning is almost impossible in many settings?

Mr Weir: Where a distinction has been drawn, the position is that preschool and nursery schools are part of the wider educational settings. For instance, there was a strong feeling amongst a lot of nursery schools that they should not be differentiated out from primary schools. One of the distinctions was that in circumstances where it initially looked like there would have to be a level of intervention, but not as far as has been made, the initial disruption for primary schools would essentially have been for one week and been by way of a late start. Initially, the position was to allow nursery schools and preschools to continue uninterrupted. The issue with that position was that it was not sustainable when the gap will be for six weeks. Also, the experience that has been relayed through the childcare

reference group is that when lockdown happens, there will be an impact on the numbers using childcare. There will be space and capacity in that system to cope with increased numbers.

Again, it is not helpful to have a situation in which children in their formative years have their education interrupted. I will reiterate that things have been done that have to be done, but this is not a good day for our young people.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for his answers. Minister, in March, the sudden onset of COVID-19 caught society off guard, sent shock waves through the education system and, indeed, many of our other systems. Overnight, teachers had to switch to a new way of teaching. There was a distinct lack of guidance and support from you and your Department for remote learning. What lessons have been learnt from that initial period of remote learning? How will you ensure that our teachers are supported to deliver effective remote learning in the time ahead?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member. In March, all of us had to cope with fairly unknown situations. However, there is a considerable level of guidance out there for schools on remote learning. Also, schools themselves, particularly those in a post-primary environment that can most easily adapt to remote learning, have developed a level of expertise that ensures that remote learning can be brought forward at relatively short notice. Most schools said that they could move fairly quickly with remote learning, but there has been support and help.

There will also be a level of work to monitor remote learning and link with the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Again, it is still going to be a difficult challenge to ensure that we have a level of uniformity for all our children. Even if the input coming from schools is identical across the board, the impact on children will still be differentiated because of a range of circumstances. The concern is that no matter what actions are taken, any level of disruption will hit those who are disadvantaged the most.

Mr Gildernew: As you touched on, Minister, there is still a very significant digital gap among families in the North. Many children will have to share a device with a parent. In many areas, including my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, there will be poor, or in some cases no, access to broadband, and that is not suitable for effective remote learning. Minister, you had indicated to my colleague Karen Mullen that you would look at widening the criteria for those who can avail themselves of IT devices to ensure that all children can get connected. Has that been done?

Mr Weir: Within the current supply of devices, a range of devices are yet to be drawn down. There is still a pool of devices that can be drawn down from. We have sought funding, and there is a business case with the Department of Finance to secure additional funding for devices as well.

The point that I am making is that devices are only one element in the challenge of remote learning. Previously, we worked with BT on vouchers, for instance. There are parts of the country in which it will be very difficult to do that level of remote learning, and different methodologies may be needed. In some parts of Northern Ireland, the general level of connectivity will not simply improve overnight or, indeed, in the foreseeable future, so it is about trying to work round those issues. The critical message is that, in order to minimise the disruption to young people, we try to keep the level of remote learning to the minimum level necessary, because the best place for children is in school.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, I have spent the last few days answering questions from teenagers about how, in this place, to bring forward a vote of no confidence, and, to be frank, I am sick to the back teeth of telling people that I cannot do that for them in relation to you. I think that it is fair to make you stay in your position to fix this mess.

Earlier, when responding to Chris Lyttle, the Chair of the Education Committee — he is not anti-education; he is one of the people who have concentrated more on protecting children — you talked, often, about fairness. Will you put your money where your mouth is and show leadership by ensuring, at last, that all exam alternatives and the post-primary transfer process for all students who will attend schools funded by your Department will be section 75 compliant and have equality impact assessments completed on them?

Mr Weir: I have control over public examinations, and we will make sure that those are fair and robust. Proposals will be brought forward in connection with that. One of the difficulties with any form of adjustments to qualifications is that making it fair for some makes it unfair for others. Certainly, I take equality of opportunity very seriously. To be fair, I did not accuse the Chair of being anti-education in

relation to that. Perhaps one of my colleagues did, but I did not. I know that our positions may differ but I am not making that accusation.

The member referred to the transfer tests. Although transfer tests lie outside my control, I have had a lot of correspondence from people pleading for them to go ahead. A lot of people contacted me to say that they were very disappointed when actions were taken to cancel them. So, let us not assume that there is a uniform position out there. The reality is that if we are talking about equality of opportunity, if there is no opportunity at all for academic selection, there will be children who have no chance whatsoever of getting into a range of schools. That is a simple reality.

Ms Armstrong: Unfortunately, my question was not answered by the Minister. I asked him whether alternatives would be equality proofed. It is up to you, Minister, to come up with options. You can create that fairness.

Talking about fairness, I was really disappointed when, earlier today, you mentioned the assumption that working parents had the time to be at home with children with special educational needs. Today is Little Christmas — Women's Christmas. More women are having to take time away from work to provide homeschooling for their children. That is not fair. So, my second question to you is this: what support is being provided to our teachers to enable parents to take over as their teachers while children are being homeschooled? Those parents are not receiving anything. They are contacting us daily saying that they cannot cope. They are supposed to be working full-time from home. I ask you, please, to be fair to the mothers out there and provide them with the support to support our teachers.

Mr Weir: First, I did not make any suggestion about working parents who have children with special educational needs. I did say that, in the first lockdown, we found that, although schools were open for vulnerable children and the children of key workers, a minimal number of parents took that up. If we are to be in a situation in which, across the board, the message is, where possible, stay at home and work at home, that will inevitably mean that a larger number of parents are at home. It seems to be the experience that, in a lot of cases, parents, irrespective of whether they have the opportunity for their child to get supervised learning in a class or special school, may well choose to have their child at home. The opportunities are there in the circumstances.

From that point of view, it is critical that schools ensure that remote learning is made available to pupils. The reality is that we cannot expect parents to be experts at being teachers. That is why, ultimately, the link between the school and the pupil is the critical one.

I know that it was and is likely to be a difficult time for a lot of parents, over the next number of weeks, because of remote learning. All we can do is make sure that schools provide the best possible information and remote learning for their pupils.

Mr Givan: The denial of children's education through face-to-face contact is something all of us should be deeply concerned about. Children are paying the price for the failures of many others, not least, when it comes to enforcement, those of the Department of Justice, or building capacity in the health service, and the surge plans that have been ridiculed, unable to deal with the spike. Now, children are paying the price, and this Minister is being used as a scapegoat by others in the House who snigger and smirk over issues of children's education. That is wholly unacceptable, and the public will see it for what it is.

Regarding the criticism from the member for Strangford, given that he had to resign from his position for breaching the regulations, he ought to reflect on calling for this Minister to go.

When it comes to supervised learning in schools, we have a lot of concern from parents. You made the point, as did Kellie Armstrong — I agree with her — that this creates difficulties for families in trying to homeschool. I agree, and that is why I want schools open, because of the very problems that members are now creating.

Those who can access schools are the children of key workers, carrying out shifts in hospitals, or vulnerable children, who come from homes where there is domestic abuse or alcoholism. Is it appropriate that those children are in a supervised environment, as opposed to being actively taught in school? Otherwise, the expectation is that key workers need to do that after they have put in a shift. Is that something we can look at?

Mr Weir: When we talk about supervised learning, I want to make it clear that this is, essentially, a facilitation of what otherwise would be remote learning, but within the school.

I have a lot of sympathy for what the member has said, and that is why the best possible resolution would be a resumption of face-to-face teaching as swiftly as possible. That is, far and away, the most appropriate solution.

The balance to be struck on this is twofold. From a practical point of view, in many ways, remote learning can be organised by schools that can provide a level of supervision. However, we cannot expect teachers to do face-to-face teaching and remote learning simultaneously. It would be very difficult to marry the two, and we have to be realistic.

The other issue is that we want to try, as much as possible, to make sure that children are treated equally. Children who are physically in school should receive the same level of education as those taking remote learning. It should be as though the two were sitting side-by-side in class. It is about trying to balance that equity, but I have a lot of sympathy for what the member says.

Mr Givan: I know that the Minister will keep this under active consideration, because I am not convinced that there is equality of treatment for those children in school. They will not get the same education outside school when they go home, because of the acute reasons they are in school in the first place.

On academic selection, removing the test does not remove the stress and anxiety, indeed often it will exacerbate it. I accept that this is a matter for the Association for Quality Education (AQE) and the 36 schools that choose to use this process, but what assurances can you give my constituents, in places like Maghaberry, Moira, Dromore and Ballinderry and other areas of Lisburn that are not close to The Wallace High School and Friends' School, the two big grammar schools in my constituency, that their children will not be disadvantaged by a criteria system that will treat them unfairly in the absence of a transfer-test process?

Mr Weir: I will always try to make sure that there is equality of provision in schools. I will keep everything under review on that basis.

Although schools are given a level of freedom to choose their own criteria, the problem with any form of criteria in a post-primary situation is that they end up being unfair to various people and there is no opportunity for those people to correct them. If we look across the water to England, for instance, we see a system in which about 7% of families pay for a very expensive form of education; they are able, effectively, to do selection by money. In addition, what are perceived to be the best schools quite often have a situation where effectively it is decided on a form of catchment area, and so the properties that are closest to the school have a level of advantage. I was struck — it is an ongoing thing — by an ad for a home finder on a national basis rather than one that particularly applies to Northern Ireland. One of the key things is proximity to a particular school; it tells you which schools are nearest to a property. The problem is that, whatever action is taken, there will be some form of selection. The more that that is based on things that are either completely outside of people's control or are entirely driven by their wealth, the less equal a society we will have.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Before I call the next member, I make the point that we have a further nine members on the list. We are not going to get to all of them, but I appeal to members and the Minister to try to be as succinct as possible in their contributions.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers so far. You outlined in your statement that vulnerable children and those of key workers will continue to have access to school. What measures will the Minister take to ensure regular attendance by those children who have been identified as vulnerable or at risk by the Department of Health? How will your Department cooperate with the Department of Health to identify whether there is non-attendance and follow up on that?

Mr Weir: The problem, even before what we have said, is availability. Given the circumstances, it is difficult to compel attendance. In terms of vulnerable children in particular, different jurisdictions found that there was very low uptake. It was important that the opportunity was given to those who are vulnerable, such as those who are statemented, but, working alongside social services, there will need to be a concentration on the children who are particularly deemed to be at risk; I think that there are about 2,000 such children in Northern Ireland. It is important that there is a very close working relationship and that a close eye is taken in that regard.

The other thing that worries me — it has always worried me — about any form of lockdown is that, although we can identify certain children and we know certain families where there are problems, there are families out there who have not appeared on anybody's radar and we do not know what happens when the door closes and the key turns in the lock. That is the broader worry that I have about lockdown, which is why any measures should be taken for the least possible amount of time.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for that response. It is important that, as Education Minister, you try to ensure that every child gets the same educational opportunity. Will you confirm that vulnerable children and those of key workers who are accessing school will continue to be taught through the curriculum?

Mr Weir: Yes. Everybody will continue to be taught through the curriculum through remote learning or whatever. The same will apply to anybody who is in school; largely speaking, it will be on a similar basis in terms of the remote learning side of things.

Mr O'Toole: The Minister was asked earlier how he would grade or rank his performance over the past few days. I will not do that, but will he consider whether he has lost the confidence of not just the education sector and the teaching community but parents and pupils in Northern Ireland? If he acknowledges that confidence has been severely jeopardised, what does he intend to do to rebuild it?

Mr Weir: I am acutely aware that any decision that I take will have consequences. It is inevitable that, even where there are decisions that are outside my control, people will react. In terms of the contact that I get, there is division on every issue. I am also aware that what is here in Northern Ireland, even particularly with some of the teaching unions, is not unique to Northern Ireland; not that long ago, there were threats of industrial action in the Republic of Ireland over concerns that are there. I can only try to work with everybody to try to produce the best possible result for our children. I think that, inevitably, people will get very frustrated and annoyed and quite often will disagree with particular decisions, but I have got to try to take those decisions as best I can and in the best interests of all of our children.

Mr O'Toole: Frankly, Minister, I think that lots of parents who are listening will dispute that the best interests of pupils have been served by your Department's conduct over the past few days. I ask you to reflect on whether, in continuing to assert that, for those of us who are opposed to the transfer test, including me and, in large part, my party, this is about an ideological crusade against it rather than protecting children this year. I ask you to reflect on the following. What has happened in the past couple of weeks has dragged the transfer test and those organisations who are responsible for it into much further disrepute than anyone who is opposed to the transfer test could have done.

Mr Weir: Frankly, that is the member's assessment, and he should be acutely aware that there is very deeply divided opinion out there on the attitude to academic selection and the transfer test. There are some, not just in the current circumstances but, obviously, beyond that, who are fiercely opposed, and there are others who are fiercely supportive. Colleagues and I got a lot of contact from people who were deeply disappointed that the transfer test could not go ahead this Saturday. No doubt there are others who will be very relieved. If the member takes the view that there is a uniform view out there, I think that he is mistaken.

Mrs Barton: Minister, given the flip-flopping that there has been with the decisions taken by AQE yesterday, is it not time that you intervened and, in the interim perhaps, worked on contingency assessment procedures, along with the stakeholders, for this year's primary transfer?

Mr Weir: I am happy to work with anybody, and, again, I await with intrigue to get the suggestions of your colleague in relation to that. If we are looking at some form of academic selection or some different level, it has to be something that has a level of cooperation from people. It is wrong to speculate, but it may well sometimes require cooperation from those who may be unwilling to cooperate or who are unsupportive of cooperation in that particular field. Again, if there were an easy solution that could be provided, I think that it would have been done, but I am happy to listen to any suggestions that come forward.

Mrs Barton: If there were cooperation and this transfer assessment procedure were to take place, would you be in favour of it taking place in the child's own primary school?

Mr Weir: My preference for any form of transfer test is that takes place in primary schools. When I was Minister previously, I lifted, to be fair, a directive or a memo that I think had come from previous Ministers that said that primary schools were not to be used for that. So, it has been permissible for the past four years. Therefore, I think that the best possible solution would be if they were to be held in primary schools. I am acutely aware that a lot of primary schools, for a range of reasons, will be opposed to the transfer test and will not be happy with it being held on their premises. From that point of view, I can permit, but I cannot compel. The other issue is that you would need to get a high level of buy-in for that because I think that it would create a level of unfairness if you had a situation where, for example, half of the pupils were able to sit the test at their own primary school and half were, effectively, playing away. That would not create a level playing field for those children either, so I think that all of those things need to be taken into account.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Minister, for coming today. My heart goes out to all of those who have been impacted by the decision so far, and children and young people's well-being and voices must be front and centre. I note that vulnerable children and children of key workers can access schools for supervised learning, so can I ask the Education Minister for care-experienced and adopted children to be included on the list of vulnerable children who are able to access a place in school should they need it?

Mr Weir: They may well be included, but there is a list that I am sure I can supply to the member of who are specifically defined as vulnerable children. Potentially, although this will also include those who are in special schools, it runs to cover about 30,000 children. From a practical point of view, a very small number of those will actually be in school. I think that there are currently about 19,000 who are statemented children, and then it goes beyond that. I do not have the list to hand, but I know that it goes well beyond children who are directly at risk and those who are statemented children. The opportunity is for anybody who has been defined as being a vulnerable child to be in.

Miss Woods: Minister, I would welcome that list. It is my understanding that they are not included on that list at the moment.

My friend works in an after-schools club that takes pupils from a number of primary schools. This may include pupils who are children of key workers. She is unclear on whether they will be operating, so can the Minister confirm that after-school clubs are classed under permitted childcare and that their staff are counted as key workers?

Mr Weir: Yes. An after-schools club, or what is effectively called "school-age childcare", is counted as part of childcare. Officials had a meeting with the childcare reference group, and there is an expectation that those sorts of groups will be in a fairly difficult position. That is because what tends to be the case with a lot of the school-age childcare is that it is effectively used as an additional device beyond school. Therefore, the problem is that parents will quite often use that in the period between 3.30 pm and 5.00 pm, or whatever time it is. If children are not going to be in school in the first place, it negates the opportunity for a lot of cases. There is no bar — because they count as childcare — on them being open, but it may well be that there will be difficulties for those organisations for practical reasons.

Mr Allister: I disassociate myself from the glee that some have expressed at the abandonment of examinations and face-to-face teaching. I agree with the Minister that this is a sad and regressive day for education, and it is one that many pupils will suffer from.

I think that the greatest frustration that many parents and teachers raise with me is the word that Mrs Barton used: the "flip flop" approach in all of this. If you take our P7 pupils, we brought them back early in August and then we foolishly postponed the testing in November. Then they worked themselves through Christmas, expecting it on Saturday, before having the rug pulled, and now the expectation is that it may or may not happen at the end of February. I ask the Minister to pledge that he will do nothing to undermine the holding of that test on 27 February, and that he will do everything in his power to encourage it.

Mr Weir: I agree with the member in that this is a very sad day for education, and maybe some of the remarks are, at times, not always appropriate with regard to that. Certainly, I will do everything in my power; I believe in academic selection and I am not going to be the barrier to this. I am not the one who takes the decision with regard to dates within that. I think that we have been forced into a situation at times where changes have had to be made because of wider public health considerations. That is not something that is unique to education, but I think that it is clearly something that is

unwelcome as an action that has had to be taken. The more seamless that we can make face-to-face teaching, the more that it is done, and I want to see face-to-face teaching and the resumption of normal school activity as soon as is possible. I think that that should be the objective for all of us, rather than, at times, looking to see what barriers can be put in place.

Mr Allister: Why, in a two-parent family, is the rule for key workers that there only needs to be one key worker? I ask because I am aware of cases — indeed, I understand from some schools that there is an increased uptake — where there is one key worker and maybe a mother at home, but the children are being sent into the school. Is that fair?

Mr Weir: I think that we are trying to cater for every eventuality with regard to family, but it is the minimum requirement. What has been said, and continues to be said, is that if you are in a position where you can look after your child, this is a provision to make sure that key workers are not disadvantaged and are able to carry on their business. If you have an ability to look after your child at home and if arrangements can be made for your child to be looked after at home, that is where your child should be to be consistent with the Executive's "Stay at home" message, and that should be followed. However, there may well be a range of range of circumstances in which one key worker is without that provision and that key worker would be impacted as well. To take one example, if you have a scenario where both parents are working and the parent who is not a key worker is in a job where they earn considerably more than the key worker, the practicality of saying that they both have to be key workers would mean that, in those circumstances, somebody who is a key worker simply has to avoid going into work. There can be a range of family circumstances. If there is an opportunity for childcare arrangements to be made so that the child can be at home or catered for elsewhere, that is in line with the "Stay at home" message and should be pursued.

Mr Carroll: Considering that the Minister spent weeks — in fact, months — ignoring or dismissing concerns from teachers, staff, parents and trade unions about the reopening and exams and considering that, until now, the Minister's stated intention was to plough ahead, causing undue stress and anxiety to pupils, does he regret his role in the crisis, all the people whom he ignored and all the pupils whom he disgracefully let down?

Mr Weir: The Member at least managed work the word "pupils" into his speech. It often seems that the Member's interventions do not appear to consider children as part of this. My aim throughout this has been to make sure that we get the best possible results for our children and that we look after the futures of children as best we can. We have all been in a very challenging environment because of COVID, and that has meant that a lot of decisions that would not be made in other circumstances have had to be made. From that point of view, I do not apologise for putting the interests of our children first throughout.

Mr Carroll: My concern has always been pupil and staff safety. In that vein, a teacher from a special educational needs school was in contact with me last night and said:

"The morale throughout our school is extremely low, and we are being forced to work in an environment that is recognised as unsafe without guidance or consideration from Peter Weir or any other Minister."

Minister, what do you say to that teacher?

Mr Weir: Guidance has been issued. The circumstances are not unsafe. Nowhere is entirely risk-free, but schools, overall, have been a largely safe environment. The evidence points to that. There is an overriding need to protect our children. There is a need for a level of provision, particularly in special schools. Anything that can be done will be done. The problems largely are not directly within the schools walls but beyond them. That will be echoed, largely speaking, by any medical or scientific advice. It is largely the behavioural aspects that have flowed from schools reopening that have driven up the R rate.

Ms Sugden: Minister, yesterday was not a good day. Children were crying. Parents were crying, and they were angry. A school principal told me that she intended to resign. I do not know whether she did, but I really hope that she did not. That gives a sense of how people felt. Yesterday was like a climax to the last year. I appreciate that you will disagree with this, but teaching staff and teachers in particular feel as though they are not being listened to. They feel as though they are being misinformed. You, as Minister, have to do more, moving forward, to make them feel valued and feel informed.

It is important to put on record the behaviour of AQE yesterday and its communication about this. Why did it have to release two statements that suggested that the exams would be cancelled and then, hours later, say that it would put in place one test to replace three? I appreciate that you have your opinion on it, as do others around the Chamber. My concern is the irresponsibility of how it put that out and its impact on children. It is not good enough. The mental health champion has rightly said that what happened yesterday was wrong. We need to do better, Minister.

Minister, I think that you alluded earlier to the difference between pre-preschool, which, I suppose, would be known as childcare, and preschool. You will understand that, in those facilities, pre-preschool children and preschool children usually attend at the same time. People who run such organisations are asking me why they cannot take preschool children and why those children are being made to learn remotely when they are having to take pre-preschool children as part of a childcare arrangement.

Mr Weir: Childcare was put in place. Childcare is largely targeted at younger children in particular. There was a strong indication. Preschool is part of the overall schools process, as are nurseries. It is an education setting, as opposed to childcare, which is not. One of the lessons from the initial lockdown was the need to protect, as much as possible, childcare, and that is critical for a lot of our citizens. Also, as part of that, I got very strong lobbying from the preschool and nursery settings. I appreciate that is not unique to this that there is no absolutely uniform view out there. I got strong lobbying that "Actually, we are part of education and should be treated on the same basis as primary schools". I think that the same applied previously whenever there was a longer closure. When we talk about a six-week period, it is a close call, but we are ensuring that preschools and nurseries are treated on the same basis as primary schools, particularly when there is some evidence that there is not a great deal of difference in terms of transmissibility between a preschool child and a P1 child, for instance. There is no perfect answer to that, but it is one in which a level of balance had to be struck.

Ms Sugden: Minister, I believe that this morning you made an announcement on seeking Executive agreement around prioritising education facilities for the vaccination. May I suggest that you consider childcare facilities as well, including childminders and their families? I have received a lot of correspondence from childminders, in particular, who are concerned about what that is bringing into their domestic home, if you like. I appreciate that it is not necessarily your decision or the Health Minister's, but, if you are advocating, maybe that is something to put forward.

Mr Weir: Without breaching the confidentiality of Executive papers — to be fair, in any Executive meeting you can, generally speaking, go to any news agency and see word for word what is being said — I indicated in the paper that I was supportive of vaccinations, particularly for those in the education sector. I suppose, to make sure that there was not necessarily a division last night, I made it clear that I would bring forward further proposals on that. I have written to the Health Minister. Again, to be fair to him, it is not something that is entirely within his remit; it is a wider UK issue. From that point of view, again, I want to see prioritisation for the education sector. Part of the answer to this is also that, collectively, if a larger volume of vaccinations can happen sooner and if there is a way across the UK that it can be absolutely ramped up, that needs to be done.

Mr McGlone: I want to raise again the issue of special schools. As we know and all of us here know, those schools provide education and support for the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. In that context, what more recent coordination has there been between your Department, the likes of the Education Authority and those special schools, Minister?

Mr Weir: We try to keep the relationship and the discussions always ongoing in relation to that. Given that, particularly for the next number of weeks, we will be in a situation where that is the main sector that will be open, we will look to intensify that at time moves on. That is critical as well.

Mr McGlone: I agree with the Minister that that is critical to gauge the reality in those schools at the moment. Will extra resources be provided to those schools to continue with — I must emphasise this — what they want to do, which is to provide a safe place to educate the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

Mr Weir: If extra resources are needed, they will be provided. The issue, from pure practicality, is that there is probably a limited amount. Again, this comes back to the issue of what is done in schools. There is a very limited amount additionally that can be done practically that will actually be of benefit in that regard. We will always follow public health advice on what is needed, but, if there is something that is needed and that requires additional resources, we will be more than happy to provide it.

Mr McGrath: My question relates to the Minister engaging and listening to the education sector, and, yes, it will be a question, not a joke, because, given the Minister's track record in listening to the sector, I do not know if I could hold my breath for that happening.

Will the Minister undertake to set up a panel between the Public Health Agency and those working in special schools? If we are going to ask them to go to work every day, almost as normal, it is absolutely imperative that you are able to listen to the concerns, hear exactly what the problems are on the ground and, critically, start addressing those issues and concerns.

Mr Weir: Look, directly I will always ensure that there will be full engagement between Education, Health and special schools. If there are additional measures that need to be taken in terms of structures, again, I am happy to facilitate that. We have very active engagements across the board, and, if there are ways to deepen that, I am more than happy to take those on board.

Mr McGrath: Will the Education Minister to do all that he can to work with the Health Minister to ensure that there is vaccination for teaching staff, classroom assistants and those working in the special schools sector? We do not simply have to follow the model in England. It seems preposterous that we could have a 51-year-old banker who gets their vaccination way in front of those staff who are going in every day to the front line to deliver education in the special schools sector. We must get it right to protect those who we must protect.

Mr Weir: To be fair to the wider government on how vaccination is decided, it is not simply an English position. There is a four-nation involvement of all four Health Ministers. They have taken a position that this should be determined by experts by way of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. I have made representations to the Executive and the Health Minister. I mentioned in the correspondence that if there is an issue around vaccinations for staff generally, special schools should be a priority.

I do not know whether the member's bank loan has been turned down, but I presume that he said "banker". I am just making sure that I heard him correctly. The focus, which is understandable, has been on those who are most vulnerable, particularly those in the very aged category. Given that 65% of those who have died were over 80, and that more than 90% of those who have died were over 65, there is good rationale as to why they should be at the top of the list.

As we move down the list, there are much stronger arguments for focusing on particular groups. I should say that I am just a year older than the mythical banker that the member referred to. I am very happy to get the vaccine, before we get any COVID deniers suddenly suggesting otherwise. If there was prioritisation, I would be very happy for any education staff member to be ahead of me. There may be a few education members of staff who want to put a syringe into me with something else in it, but I would be at ease on that front and I have pressed for prioritisation.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): OK, members, that concludes —

Mr Lyttle: On a point of order.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): There is not really a facility for a point of order but go ahead.

Mr Lyttle: I would like your guidance and a ruling of the Assembly as to how you would correct the insulting, baseless and, frankly, embarrassing remarks made by Mr Buckley that referred to me, as a Member of the House and Chairperson of the Education Committee, as anti-education.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I will look at the report of that. Thank you.

That concludes questions on the statement. We will now have a five-minute suspension to prepare for the next statement, from the Minister of Health. I advise members to be very observant of all social-distancing rules, particularly within the Chamber.