



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Contents

## Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Royal Assent ..... 1

Pension Schemes Bill: Royal Assent ..... 1

Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent..... 1

Local Government (Meetings and Performance) Bill: Royal Assent ..... 1

## Assembly Business

Committee for Justice: Deputy Chairperson..... 1

## Private Members' Business

COVID-19: Guidance for Schools ..... 1

# Assembly Members

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)  
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)  
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)  
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)  
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)  
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)  
Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)  
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)  
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)  
Blair, John (South Antrim)  
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)  
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)  
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)  
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)  
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)  
Brogan, Ms Nicola (West Tyrone)  
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)  
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)  
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)  
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)  
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)  
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)  
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)  
Catney, Pat (Lagan Valley)  
Chambers, Alan (North Down)  
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)  
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)  
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)  
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)  
Dolan, Ms Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Dunne, Stephen (North Down)  
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)  
Easton, Alex (North Down)  
Ennis, Ms Sinéad (South Down)  
Flynn, Ms Órlaithí (West Belfast)  
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)  
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)  
Hargey, Ms Deirdre (South Belfast)  
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)  
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)  
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)  
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)  
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)  
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)  
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)  
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)  
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)  
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)  
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)  
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)  
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)  
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)  
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)  
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)  
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)  
McGrath, Colin (South Down)  
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)  
McHugh, Maolíosá (West Tyrone)  
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)  
McLaughlin, Ms Sinead (Foyle)  
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)  
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)  
Maskey, Alex (Speaker)  
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)  
Muir, Andrew (North Down)  
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)  
Murphy, Ms Áine (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)  
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)  
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)  
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)  
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)  
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)  
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)  
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)  
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)  
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)  
Rogan, Ms Emma (South Down)  
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)  
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)  
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)  
Stewart, John (East Antrim)  
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)  
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)  
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)  
Weir, Peter (Strangford)  
Wells, Jim (South Down)  
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 9 September 2021

*The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Executive Committee Business

### Budget (No. 2) Bill: Royal Assent

**Mr Speaker:** The Budget (No. 2) Bill received Royal Assent on 4 August 2021. It will be known as the Budget (No. 2) Act (NI) 2021. It is chapter 5.

### Pension Schemes Bill: Royal Assent

**Mr Speaker:** The Pension Schemes Bill received Royal Assent on 9 August 2021. It will be known as the Pension Schemes Act (NI) 2021. It is chapter 6.

### Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

**Mr Speaker:** The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill received Royal Assent on 26 August 2021. It will be known as the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Act (NI) 2021. It is chapter 7.

### Local Government (Meetings and Performance) Bill: Royal Assent

**Mr Speaker:** The Local Government (Meetings and Performance) Bill received Royal Assent on 26 August 2021. It will be known as the Local Government (Meetings and Performance) Act (NI) 2021. It is chapter 8.

## Assembly Business

### Committee for Justice: Deputy Chairperson

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notification of the resignation of Linda Dillon as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice, with effect from 31 July. The nominating officer for Sinn Féin has informed me that Sinéad Ennis has been nominated as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice, with effect from 2 August. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

## Private Members' Business

### COVID-19: Guidance for Schools

**Mr Speaker:** Having been given notice by not fewer than 30 Members, I have summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of debating a motion on guidance to schools on COVID-19.

**Ms Brogan:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly expresses its significant concern with increasing reports of pupil absences due to the COVID-19 situation in our schools; recognises that this situation has been worsened by the failure of the Minister of Education to develop clear and robust guidance for our school staff; notes the scale of the burden that this has placed on many of our principals and teachers; and calls on the Minister of Education to work urgently with the Public Health Agency (PHA) to issue guidance that is cognisant of the unique circumstances of the school setting in the context of COVID-19.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one and a half hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members

who wish to speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the motion.

**Ms Brogan:** First, I thank my colleague and Deputy Chair of the Education Committee, Pat Sheehan, for initiating this emergency sitting of the Assembly, and I thank all Members who supported his petition to do so.

I imagine that all Members, across the Assembly, have been inundated with correspondence from principals, school leaders, teachers and parents of pupils who have raised grave concerns about the complete chaos that schools have been left to face since restarting this term. It is important that we take the time to raise those concerns on behalf of schools and parents and on behalf of the children and young people, who, yet again, face huge disruption to their education and daily life because of the poor planning and preparation of our Education Minister. I am sure that we all agree that the best place for our children and young people is at school with their peers, but they must be safe, and their families must be confident in their safety. It is hard to believe that, within a couple of weeks of schools reopening, the situation is in such disarray that the Assembly has had to be recalled.

Last week, the Education Committee heard evidence directly from teaching representatives. They told us in no uncertain terms that the enormous burden being placed on principals and school leaders was unsustainable and unfair. They had serious concerns about the adequacy of the guidance issued by the Minister and gave numerous examples of where support to implement that guidance was lacking. Within days of that engagement, increasing reports of pupil absences due to the COVID-19 situation in our schools confirmed the concerns raised by those trade union reps. Of 700 pupils attending Larne High School, more than 400 were told to stay at home. Within days of trying to implement the Minister's Restart, teachers were reporting difficulties in keeping children safe and in school, and the scale of the disarray became increasingly apparent.

Principals reported their struggles to report cases to the PHA, desperately trying to use dedicated phone lines that were often unavailable for hours. In all other jurisdictions, track and trace is handled directly by public health. Principals had repeatedly warned that leaving the administration of tracking and tracing COVID cases to schools was overwhelming and undermined the ability of principals to do their own job. The Minister failed to recognise that until yesterday. Worse

still, the guidance attempted to shift even more responsibility onto principals. It suggested that schools could choose to bypass the PHA and directly inform pupils identified as a close contact with a positive case.

Yesterday, on the eve of the debate, the Minister was finally shamed into shifting track and trace responsibility from school principals and, in line with other jurisdictions, returning it to the PHA. Although that move was certainly welcome, we must make sure that those duties are carried out correctly by the PHA and that the burden is removed from principals and school leaders.

**Mr Buckley:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Brogan:** Gabh ar aghaidh. Go ahead.

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does she recognise that the agreed position of the Executive was to carry out testing in schools and that that was agreed by all parties, including hers, which is well represented at the Executive table? If Sinn Féin, including the Member, felt that it was such an important issue, why did it not raise it at that stage?

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the Member for his intervention, but it is, I believe, the job of the Education Minister to make sure that those practices are in place. In that regard, I encourage ongoing engagement and communication between the Education Minister, the PHA and school leaders to ensure that the shift is implemented correctly.

The tracking and tracing of COVID cases in schools is not the only problem: COVID testing for schoolchildren has become a huge issue as well. With the return to school, a rise in the number of cases was widely anticipated. Additional planning to ensure that children identified as close contacts could access testing as quickly and efficiently as possible would have been fundamental to achieving the stated aim of keeping our children safe in school and minimising disruption. It seems, following robust questioning by Pat Sheehan at the Education Committee yesterday, that the Department of Education did not contact the PHA to prepare for and facilitate increased testing. Within days of the new term, an emergency mobile testing unit had to be hastily deployed to deal with the hundreds of pupils requiring polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing in Larne. In many areas, parents reported difficulties in accessing PCR tests for children, and some families were directed to testing centres many miles away, making it impossible for those without transport

to access tests. Again, with the correct planning and preparation, that could have been avoided.

I have engaged with many principals, school leaders and parents in my constituency of West Tyrone. All agreed that the guidance is not working. It is not working for the school leaders, the teachers or the parents, but, most importantly, it is not working for the pupils, whose education is once again being affected. A distraught principal in my area contacted me to offer some insight into the challenges that they face. This is just one example, but it offers some insight. I was told that a mum tested positive over the weekend. As required by the guidance, her children were given a PCR test. The results were negative, so the children attended school on Monday and Tuesday before one of them then tested positive. Three more children in the same group have now tested positive. We need a different, more robust process.

The Committee has been told repeatedly that the Minister and the Department are working closely with the Department of Health and other relevant bodies, yet, during a long summer recess with more than eight weeks to plan and prepare, measures have not been put in place to ensure that our children return to a safe and secure new term. The Minister is not dealing with something totally unknown: the virus has been around for some time now, and lessons should have been learned. It is not hard to understand that, if we are relaxing some restrictions and increasing interaction in schools, other measures need to be in place. For example, with an airborne virus, if other interventions are relaxed, ventilation will move up the priority list. Schools were empty for weeks, but the Minister did not initiate risk assessments. No measures were introduced to monitor air quality, and no action was taken to improve poor airflows. Unlike in other jurisdictions, there were no plans to fund and acquire CO2 alarms. While the Welsh Minister for Education invested millions in providing schools with that technology, our Minister issued advice to open windows and doors if possible. What if it is not possible? What should our schools do in that eventuality? Did the Minister have any plans in place? If classrooms had been given the technology, staff would be able to take immediate action to address a build-up of poor-quality air — .

**Mr Stalford:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Brogan:** One minute, please.

If classrooms had been given the technology, staff would be able to take immediate action to

address a build-up of poor-quality air through simple measures such as taking an open-air break while the classroom is aired. In classrooms where CO2 alarms repeatedly register poor air quality, additional measures such as the introduction of ventilation systems or air filters could be considered.

**Mr Stalford:** I thank the Member for giving way. I will quote to the Member the president of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) Northern Ireland, Graham Gault, who said:

*"With the PHA taking on contact tracing it will free up our school leaders to attend to their core business which is learning and teaching, that in itself will be very, very welcome."*

The problem was identified last week, and the Minister has moved to address it, has she not?

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the Member for his intervention, but we have now moved on to ventilation, which is another major issue.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thanks very much to my Education Committee colleague for giving way. Does the Member recognise that the issue to which the other Member referred was not identified last week but has been an ongoing issue for many weeks and, indeed, months? The burden being placed on our school leaders in relation to contact tracing has been well known for some time. Regrettably, this is a delayed intervention, however welcome it may be.

**Ms Brogan:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I absolutely agree with it.

Going back to my speech, there has also been a lack of urgency in relation to the most basic of measures: replacing windows that do not open either by design or because of disrepair. The Minister surely knows that ventilation is most difficult in our oldest school buildings.

Finally, we all know the importance of children attending school. We all want pupils in school and classrooms to be up and running, but we also know that schools need proper support to remain open safely during the pandemic, so I urge every Member here to support our schools and our teachers by supporting the motion.

**Mr Newton:** Regrettably, I have to oppose the motion. Again, I recognise that we are in a difficult COVID-19 situation as far as our children and our pupils are concerned. Obviously, there is concern across the teaching professions, among parents and, indeed, in the

wider community about the virus spread. We all recognise that. We in the DUP have been saying from the very beginning of the pandemic that the education of our children and young people is a major concern for all of us. The protection of children, teaching staff and support staff is of paramount importance. We also need to be mindful of the need to protect vulnerable adults who come into contact with pupils and of possible contact transmission.

The Education Minister's priority is to make school a safe place for all children and school staff. Keeping children in the classroom, with face-to-face teaching and interaction with their teachers and peers, is key to their future academic success.

**12.15 pm**

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Member for kindly giving way. I agree that we all want schools to be safe places, but surely if the Member were engaging with principals, teachers and parents in his constituency, he would realise that the current guidance that has been rolled out by the Department is making schools unsafe and is difficult for teachers and principals to work from.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Newton:** I am not the only Member in the Chamber who engages with schools.

The benefits of pupils' education is immense. Their physical well-being is improved. We all share the concerns about young people's mental health and well-being during the pandemic. Minister McIlveen, who is a former teacher and an experienced professional, takes her responsibilities seriously. In the past week, the Minister has met 10 school principals face to face, talked to front-line staff, listened to their concerns and experiences, and taken positive action rather than just moaning on social media.

I want to refer to those few words in the motion that make it impossible to support:

*"worsened by the failure of the Minister of Education to develop clear and robust guidance for our school staff".*

Is that not what the debate is really about? It is only an attack on the DUP Minister.

**Mr Lyttle:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Newton:** I will not give way. Thanks. I have already given way.

It is really about Sinn Féin looking for sound bites. Questions do, however, need to be asked. Is Minister McIlveen going on a solo run with her actions? Is she not consulting her ministerial colleagues? Is she being irresponsible? The answer to those questions is, emphatically, no. As Mr Buckley said, the Minister took the strategy to the Executive on 12 August. It was discussed around the Executive table. It was discussed by Sinn Féin, the SDLP and Alliance. Did they raise any objections? No. All the Ministers — the Executive — signed off on the guidelines that were issued. I am sure that the Ulster Unionists, when they come to speak, will support the Health Minister, his responsibility for the PHA and the close relationship that Minister McIlveen has with him and the PHA on those matters.

The mover of the motion made much about CO2 monitoring. I am not technical: I do not know about CO2 monitoring but understand the principle of what it is supposed to do.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Newton:** I have already given way. Sorry: I will give way.

**Mr Allister:** Given what the Member has said about those processes having already been approved by the Executive in August — I assume that that is correct; I do not know, but I assume so because no one has risen to contradict him on that — and, if that is so, does it not suggest that not only is the debate a stunt but is one that illustrates the risible dysfunctionality of an Executive where one lead party tables a motion to eviscerate a Minister of the other lead party? Is it any wonder that the Executive lack any credibility?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has 10 seconds.

**Mr Newton:** I will finish by saying that, if CO2 monitoring is agreed, the Finance Minister needs to step up to the plate on the cost.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for that.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the proposer of the motion. The SDLP was happy to sign it in the light of the considerable challenges faced in our schools. I have to say from the outset that it is very disappointing that we, again, find ourselves in the situation of discussing another monumental failure by the Department of

Education and, unfortunately, by another Minister in appropriately planning for the pandemic and its impact on schools and our children's learning.

The Minister will know that, over the past week, principals in her constituency and across Northern Ireland have been at the point of desperation in looking for support, help and guidance. They find themselves in an intolerable situation. I hoped that the Minister would have learned from the mistakes of her predecessor about how important it is to have robust and properly evidenced plans in place, with clear monitoring mechanisms to keep children and staff safe while mitigating disruption to learning in the classroom. Unfortunately, that has not been the case to date, based on the information that we have all received and on the position that we find ourselves in today.

Be in no doubt that our schools, teaching staff and principals are facing crisis conditions, with patience wearing very thin as they continue to be expected to work under increasingly intolerable conditions. At 6.00 pm yesterday, one principal, in tears, at breaking point, sat with me for an hour — a person whom I consider to be very strong and able to handle almost any situation who has been forced into a very difficult position by the pressure of the burden imposed by the guidance in its current form.

Principals are required to be experts in COVID-19 tracking and tracing while also delivering the highest teaching standards expected of them. It is painfully clear that, once the level of infection in the community reaches certain points, schools cannot do both jobs of teaching and mitigating a difficult situation. In recent days, we have reached and exceeded that point, and the Minister and the Department have failed to act quickly enough to repair the situation, with the exception of the move by the PHA in recent hours. It took overwhelming pressure from MLAs, parents and the media to force the hand of the DUP Minister once again.

Like others in the Chamber, I have met principals — across West Tyrone and every constituency in Northern Ireland — over the past weeks, both those who were anxious about the return of schools and those who have been forced into very difficult situations since the return of schools. The track and trace guidance that schools are expected to follow is not fit for purpose; from comments made so far, I think that that is widely accepted. It is a logistical headache for teachers and, ultimately,

it is very badly letting down our school staff, parents and principals. It is not acceptable.

For well over a year, the SDLP has been calling for a robust plan to tackle all things COVID-related in our schools. That robust plan has not materialised. There has been no contingency planning, as confirmed by officials in the Education Committee yesterday. We are left with a complete mess, as many people have witnessed over the past days.

We learned at this week's Education Committee that the North of Ireland is the only jurisdiction where schools are required to do contact tracing. Why was that, Minister? Why were principals put in that position to begin with? For everybody else, it was being done by their PHA. Considering the disruption to learning that contact tracing is causing in schools by taking principals and teachers away from education to perform the administration around contact tracing instead of teaching, why has it taken so long to act? Again, why was it put in place to begin with?

Yesterday, we witnessed the move — finally — by the PHA to take over contact tracing here. I welcome it, but it should not have needed to happen in the first place. While it is a welcome move, it begs the question of why the Minister and the Department deviated from all other jurisdictions and created their own guidance that proved to be absolutely unworkable by those at the coalface in our classrooms and at the front of our schools. It also begs the questions of whether the PHA has capacity to support every school in Northern Ireland and of what additional resources will be directed to tracking and tracing in schools to make it workable over the next few weeks. I hope that quality planning around those practical matters has been conducted and discussed, and we look forward to seeing more detail.

It is clear that day two and day eight testing is not working, because children who are tested on day two are testing negative, but by day eight, they are proving to be positive, in between which, they have interacted with a lot of students and other children. That is leading to a mass rise in the level of infection in our schools, ultimately making schools unsafe. The guidance is not workable and needs to be reviewed.

Again —.

**Mr Stalford:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McCrossan:** I am limited in time. The DUP is obviously on the one path today, so I will not allow it.

On PCR testing, it is clear that there were no proper discussions between the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health.

Otherwise, there would not have been the crisis situation that we had this week of parents not being able to access PCR testing and having to travel up the country or further afield, leaving work and other things.

Finally, will someone please have a conversation with the PHA to ask it to return calls to principals who are at breaking point this week? As of yesterday, quite a number of them have, after two days, not received a call back to answer their concerns.

That needs to be resolved. I hope that the Minister does resolve it.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up.

**Mr McCrossan:** I have a word of advice for the Minister and the DUP.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr McCrossan:** I sincerely hope that they do not take the Ministry in the next mandate —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up. Thank you. Order.

**Mr McCrossan:** — because they are doing harm to children's education.

**Mr Stalford:** *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Stalford, order.

**Mr Butler:** I thank those who tabled the motion for bringing it to the Chamber. We will support the motion. I get the point that my Committee colleague made about the line in the motion that seems to point blame directly at the Minister. I remind everybody that we are not in politics to serve our parties or any single purpose other than the people of Northern Ireland. Today, I would hate to see an intensification of the fear that is now gripping our schools. It is very important — I am getting a look from Mr Allister — but this is key.

**Mr Stalford:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He has provided a useful segue to the point that I was trying to make to the Member for West Tyrone that he did not want to

hear. It is my understanding that attendance rates last week showed an overall in-school attendance rate of 94%, which is higher than at this point last year and does not sit with the vision of chaos that the Member for West Tyrone sought to portray in his contribution.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Member for his point. The intervention illustrates something for me. We are still in the midst of the COVID pandemic, and, whilst he is correct, one of the things that emanates from the Chamber is the difference in attitude to taking risks. Whilst I agree with you, there are members of your party who are prepared to take much more risk. Not the Education Minister, but there are people who have been calling for the relaxation of the COVID restrictions for the economy. You will take that in the round. My background is in risk assessment in the Fire and Rescue Service, but I also know about the need to appropriately appoint people to deal with risk. That is why I have issues with the guidance as it was issued. I am grateful to the Minister because she has been working with the PHA and my Minister to revise that guidance. It was never the case that principals and school leaders should have been doing the contact tracing. For over a year, Graham Gault of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) Northern Ireland and the other teaching unions and leaders have been asking for the contact-tracing issue to be addressed. Now, it is going to be addressed, and that has to be welcomed.

People are being engulfed by the fear of what is happening in our schools. We need to be very accurate when we talk about the risks that are in schools, because the Public Health Agency and our school leaders are telling us that schools are a safe place. That is not the problem, and let us not conflate the issue. The issue is the burden on our teachers —

**Mr McCrossan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Butler:** In one second. The issue is the burden on our teachers, children and, in particular, children with additional needs. We agree that the best place to have our children is in school, but we have to be collegiate and collective in how we address that. Hopefully, the Executive will come to the right conclusion today in how they do that. In the Committee, Mr Sheehan has brought up, very rightly, the contingency planning that needs to happen for exams. We have the transfer test that may or may not happen. I hope that the contingency

plans will be addressed. However, there are practical steps that we can take.

Ventilation is one of the things that we have been talking about. I go back to the point about having the right people in the room to do that. At the Education Committee's meeting yesterday, we asked the departmental official about ventilation. They said that the guidance states that school leaders can open a window. Listen: school leaders are not ventilation experts. If we want our children to be in school safely, let us have a full ventilation assessment of our school property. Even if it means asking the Finance Minister for £10 million or £20 million, let us make sure that our schools are the safest place for our children. We do not want to have the same debates in May and June next year about exams, what to do about results and how that will pan out. We now have hindsight; we now have experience. I will let the Member for West Tyrone in.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Member for kindly giving way. The Member is right: schools are safe places. However, they are safe places because our teachers and principals have pushed themselves to breaking point over the last year to ensure that that is the case. Will the Member agree with me that they are all saying — to him, as well as to me and others — that schools are being made unsafe by the unworkable guidance that has been forced on them to implement in schools?

**Mr Butler:** In the communication that I am having with teachers, none of them has said that schools are becoming unsafe in terms of the COVID risk. They are becoming unsafe because of fear and the impact on teachers and school leaders of the additional workload to administer and look after their classes.

Mental health has been touched on. We have been debating mental health and mental health issues for a number of years, and mental health is one of the things that is being impacted at the moment. The guidance, as it was, was not fit for purpose because it was having an impact on the mental health not just of the pupils but of our school leaders.

We need to look at the guidance that is going to be issued, hopefully later today or tomorrow. There has been a tacit acceptance by the unions that they are broadly in favour, but there are other things that we are going to need to do to keep our pupils in our schools. We need to be agile, we need to communicate and we need to make sure that everybody is in the conversation. I urge the Minister to ensure that,

with all of the technical issues, whether they relate to health or ventilation, the right people are responsible for addressing them.

## 12.30 pm

**Mr Lyttle:** I welcome the opportunity that the recall presents for the Assembly to engage with a Northern Ireland Minister of Education on a significant challenge that our schools face. I regret that an Assembly recall was necessary to make this engagement possible. I believe that this is the fourth time that a DUP Education Minister has been recalled during the COVID-19 pandemic. The DUP can present that as the targeting of an Education Minister or it can reflect on the nature of the engagement that has taken place between the Assembly and the Education portfolio. We need calm and measured leadership, so I will do my best to be as measured as I can.

As I said, the DUP can pass this off as party politics or misrepresent it as being the responsibility of the Executive alone, but I respectfully ask that it should recognise the seriousness of the matter and change course. The Education Minister must recognise that the failure to at least properly communicate and implement the new test, trace and isolation policy for pupils has caused significant concern and distress for teachers, parents and pupils across Northern Ireland. It is quite clear that a number of school leaders — some of whom are from my constituency, although the Member for East Belfast did not appear to recognise that earlier — lack confidence in the new pupil isolation guidance and consider that the testing and tracing capacity necessary for it to function was not adequately planned or implemented. School leaders have been overwhelmed by tracing responsibilities, and the testing capacity for pupils was not in place for many.

However, of most concern has been the lack of communication from the Education Minister and, to be fair, from some other Ministers over the summer months on this and other matters that affect the capacity of children to attend school. That needs to be addressed. There is an opportunity for the Education Minister, today and at the joint Education and Health Committee that I am proposing, to urgently and openly communicate the scientific and medical rationale for the new pupil isolation guidance. What, if any, alternatives are being considered to that guidance? For example, a differentiation between household and non-household contacts is an issue being raised by many people. Also, how would the testing and tracing capacity that that would require to function be delivered?

The key aims for education are clear: the safety of our school population, maximising in-school learning and ensuring that contingency arrangements are in place if attendance is not possible for any reason.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyttle:** I will give way briefly, yes.

**Mr O'Dowd:** In relation to testing and tracing, what specific measures were put in place for special needs schools? There are unique circumstances there. If the PHA does take over tracking and tracing, what measures will it put in place to ensure that the unique circumstances in special needs schools are taken into consideration?

**Mr Lyttle:** I am very grateful for that intervention.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you.

It is my understanding that some special arrangements have been put in place for special schools, particularly in different forms of testing. However, there are special educational needs pupils in mainstream schools who need access to those different arrangements as well and are experiencing some trauma due to those different arrangements not being in place for them. The Children's Law Centre has issued a statement warning that children with special educational needs are being forgotten again in this stage of the pandemic, as they were, unacceptably, at other stages. It would be good to hear from the Education Minister on those issues today.

Another key action that can be taken is the delivery of enhanced ventilation and air quality in schools via the provision of CO2 monitoring and air filtration devices. My colleague, the Alliance Party leader, Naomi Long, first requested such provision in the summer of 2020, yet on this matter Northern Ireland remains behind other jurisdictions, such as Wales, where a £6 million air quality fund has been allocated.

There is also a need for comparative data on pupil infection and attendance rates in order to assess the safety and functionality of any approach to the new school term. The initial experience of teachers, pupils, parents and guardians suggests that there is a need for

much clearer communication, and perhaps even for a review.

The Education Committee heard that community transmission is also impacting on the ability of our children to attend school, so we respectfully request that the Health Minister communicate clearly what is being done to bring community transmission, which is impacting on the attendance of children at school, under control. The children of Northern Ireland have sacrificed a great deal during the pandemic, and it is time for the Education Minister, the Health Minister and the Chief Medical Officer to set out clearly an understandable and deliverable plan that will keep our children safe and in school.

**Mr Gildernew:** As the second week of the return to school comes to a close, there are only two words to describe the situation in which children, parents and school staff find themselves: confused and ill-prepared. The Minister of Education has a responsibility to ensure that schools are supported during the pandemic, but the PHA also has a clear responsibility. Although I welcome the recent announcement that the PHA will take on contact tracing I caution, Members and Minister, that that may not resolve the situation. I have concerns around the PHA's capacity. I have outstanding questions in with the Department about the PHA's capacity, and, given the levels of transmission referred to, I am still concerned.

This week, I have been inundated, as, I am sure, have other Members, with letters and phone calls from principals, teachers and parents who are in a state of disbelief that the Department and the agencies tasked with preparing schools for education in the COVID age have failed to do so. I share that sense of disbelief that the summer months, and, indeed, the months preceding the summer months, were not used to put in place the apparatus that we knew would be needed to facilitate a smooth start to the school year. We owed our teachers and students that much, following the insecurity that they had endured throughout the months of the pandemic. The summer months were a time and an opportunity to set up a robust find, test and trace system specifically tailored to the education setting. The Department of Education and the PHA have apparently wasted that valuable time and space, and they have failed to do what was so obviously and badly needed.

The Department of Health's own modelling informed us of the scenarios that we could expect at this point and of what measures would be needed in order to open schools as

safely and effectively as possible. Instead, we have a situation in which school principals have been asked to carry out contact tracing. That has taken up huge amounts of their time and created huge anxiety. We also have children being sent home with suspected COVID symptoms who cannot get the PCR test that they need close to their home. Parents are therefore required to drive long distances to access the needed and anxiously awaited test. I have direct experience of that. My child was sent home as a result of being a close contact, and, on the day that he was sent home, I could not book a test any closer than Antrim or Randalstown. That is the reality that has to be grappled with. We also have children returning to school with a negative test, even though they have been in close contact with a positive case.

As referenced by my colleague Nicola Brogan, we see no evidence of investment in the ventilation that we know, and have known for a long time, is needed in school settings. Regrettably, we see no evidence that any learning has taken place as we head into the twentieth month of the pandemic. As we work our way through the pandemic, our schools and our communities deserve the support and best efforts of those of us who are charged with the decision-making that impacts on the lives of everyone. We must remain open to all possible solutions. We must also look to best practice around the world to see what is working for others and not doggedly follow poor decision-making where we could be doing better. I believe, and have believed all along throughout the pandemic, that we should be using the undoubted talents and skills of our population and workforce to lead across this island and the world in what we are doing and not wait and follow anyone, because time is not on our side when dealing with a virus of the nature of this coronavirus.

Decisions therefore need to be made: this is crunch time. We need to avoid uncertainty and recklessness. It is clear that there is a huge amount of concern among the people who are watching this debate.

It is appropriate that we are here to discuss the situation, to reflect that concern and take actions to deal with it.

Critically, we urgently need a decision on the availability of vaccines for the 12-to-15-year-old cohort. This week, data showed that the highest percentage of individuals testing positive were aged between 10 and 14. An informed decision is needed on the vaccination of those younger cohorts. The Minister of Health should look at the experience of other countries, including the

South of Ireland, France and Germany. This week, 'The Irish Times' reported that the vaccination of younger cohorts is linked to the downward trend in positive COVID-19 cases. The Minister also needs to look at advice from the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The Department of Education and the Public Health Agency must now work together at pace to deliver a safe education system for our children, for those who teach and support them in our school communities and for wider society. Sinn Féin will continue to provide that leadership —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Gildernew:** — at this time to our community.

**Mrs Dodds:** I put on record my thanks and gratitude to our school leaders, teachers and staff for all of their work during these difficult times; indeed, I thank them for their efforts over the past 18 months. I also say unequivocally and unashamedly that ensuring that our schools remain open safely, with our children inside their classrooms, must be our top priority. I have listened carefully to the debate, and I caution the Member for West Tyrone, who, in his political charge against the Minister, seems to be engendering fear about safety in our schools. That will harm the most precious of our population, and it will be judged harshly by the community.

**Mr McCrossan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Dodds:** No, I have a lot to get through.

I also want to ensure that our children have a holistic experience of school, enjoying the benefits of all aspects of school life, not a limited, partial return that denies our young people access to the rounded educational journey that they need. It is beyond doubt that the best place for our young people is safely in school with their peers, learning together. It is a tragedy that so many of our young people report increased mental health issues, isolation and loneliness.

We all know the damage that has been done by the disruption of the past 18 months to children across Northern Ireland. It is vital that a clear and unambiguous message comes from the Assembly today that others in the Chamber share our desire to keep schools open. As an Assembly and an Executive, we have a responsibility to work together to reassure families, teachers and parents that schools are

safe, as evidenced by extensive research, and not to engage in political hyperbole that serves to cause more distress and uncertainty at a time when it can least be afforded.

As other Members have said, it is important to remember that the current guidance was a unanimous decision by all Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive, including those belonging to the party of the proposer of the motion, not just the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education. That is the collective spirit that our constituents want to continue: working together to ensure the safe, sustained return of pupils to school.

**A Member:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Dodds:** No.

That is why I welcome the allocation of £5.6 million by the Education Minister last week for schools to deal with the ongoing COVID pressures. That is why I welcome the collaborative working by the Education and Health Ministers to identify solutions and to deliver practical help and support to our schools. The adoption of responsibility for contact tracing by the Public Health Agency is an important step. It will allow teachers and staff to focus on empowering our young people and ensure that those who can least afford to fall behind in their education are not disadvantaged. Health guidance must be fit for purpose, and it must ensure that widespread disruption in our schools is avoided. The approach to and availability of testing must be addressed urgently, and I would welcome the Minister outlining any possible changes that can be made by the Department of Health or the Department of Education to ensure that.

**12.45 pm**

Quite rightly, this is a touchstone issue for the people of Northern Ireland. The countless parents, pupils, educators and school leaders I have spoken to in recent weeks all spoke with one voice. They want to see pupils in school. They want to see them learning together. They want additional support, and they want problems solved. That is what the Minister has been doing. What they do not want are battles for the media spotlight, schools used as political footballs, pupils denied access to education and those who can least afford it falling further behind in their educational journey. We in the Chamber all have a responsibility to show leadership and to work collectively to meet those challenges. Important steps to meet the pressures have been taken, and I know that the

Minister will continue to work with all stakeholders to ensure that children are safe in school and can continue their education.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you.

**Mr Carroll:** I support the motion and thank the Member who proposed it.

Once again, schoolchildren, teachers, classroom assistants, school staff and parents have great cause to be concerned both about the COVID rates in the pandemic and government inaction; indeed, the COVID rates are startling, given how long ago the pandemic reached us. One study in recent weeks indicated that one in 40 people here might have COVID, and that was before the schools reopened. The way education and schools have been left is, frankly, more like a dog's dinner. One would think that, in that context, all efforts would have been made on behalf of and by the Education Minister and the wider Executive to anticipate the difficulties that are now mounting in schools. One would think that efforts would have been made to ensure the safety of staff and children through clear guidance, as well as practical support such as rigorous moves to ensure ventilation. One would think that clear lines of communication between schools and health authorities would have been developed and that a robust form of track and trace and isolation regulations would have been developed by now. It is disappointing but, sadly, unsurprising that the current Education Minister has followed the practice of her predecessor and done very little in reality to address those serious concerns. It is, frankly, embarrassing that Executive colleagues are making a last-ditch effort to intervene following an outcry from teachers and their unions. It seems that the summer was definitely wasted in that regard.

We should have taken our lead from the trade unions and representatives of the workers on the front line then and now, who are doing their best to protect not only their members but, crucially, children and their families. From speaking to staff, I know that the frustration is palpable. It really beggars belief that they were forced and told to do contact tracing. That speaks volumes about the Minister's view of the PHA as well.

There has been constant disruption to teaching; no practical support for ventilation, such as CO2 monitors or air filters; no clear instruction, leaving principals to make difficult decisions about isolation in individual schools; no

contingency measures or planning for exams like the transfer test; and concerns about pay for substitute teachers who have to isolate. The list goes on and on. That is what we have come to expect from the Executive during the pandemic: pandemonium in our schools, care homes and hospitals while the main focus is put not on guaranteeing the safety of workers but on getting those workers into workplaces that may be unsafe. Some 18 months on, they still cannot get it right. I call on the Minister today to convene an emergency meeting of teachers, principals and their unions to hear the concerns and to pull out all the stops to address them head-on. Will the Minister, in her comeback today, commit to doing that? If so, how urgently will she do it?

**Mr Stalford:** I direct the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Interests: I am a governor of Braniel Primary School.

First, I pay tribute to the teachers, classroom assistants and caretaking staff who are working in our schools to keep them open and safe and to ensure that our children and young people have access to their education, which they have been denied for a very long time as a consequence of the pandemic. I also pay tribute to the pupils and young people who have had to persevere with their education in extremely trying and difficult circumstances.

We should start with first principles. For me, the first principle is that children should, insofar as is possible, be allowed to attend school in order to further their education.

It is accepted that there is no substitute for classroom learning and the classroom learning experience. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to ensure that all our children have access to that experience. Research also demonstrates that, when schools close, those who are hit hardest by such closures are children from poor and less well-off backgrounds. In order to protect those children, it is absolutely essential that we have as much classroom learning as possible.

With the issue under debate here, it has been flagged, and concerns have been expressed. The Minister, in conjunction with the Minister of Health, is now moving to address those concerns. In many respects, beyond political grandstanding — it is always a joy to watch the Member for West Tyrone go from zero to eight on the Richter scale during any debate — it is quite a moot motion now, because the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health are moving jointly to address the concerns that have been expressed.

**Mr Gildernew:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Stalford:** I am happy to give way to Mr Gildernew.

**Mr Gildernew:** I am picking up on the Member's reference to the fact that the Minister has a lot in her in tray and a lot to deal with at present. He also mentioned grandstanding. Will he agree with me that it is crucial that the Assembly and the Executive remain focused on dealing with these issues rather than engaging in reckless grandstanding outside of the Chamber today?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr Stalford:** Thank you. Who could believe that that was a representative of the party that kept us down for three years without devolution?

Let us not pretend that the other parties, including some of those who brought the motion today, were in the dark about the situation. The paper, as was referenced by others, was agreed at the Executive meeting on 12 August, and all parties were present at that meeting.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that, in dismissing the concerns that are being presented by parties here today, he is dismissing the concerns of teachers, parents and pupils across Northern Ireland? The key question is one of communication about the medical and scientific rationale for the new pupil social isolation policy. That is a legitimate request.

**Mr Stalford:** I am not in any way dismissing those concerns. That is why it is so reckless for Mr McCrossan to declare that schools are safe *[Interruption]* — I know that you are not — but in the next sentence to declare that they are also unsafe.

**Mr McCrossan:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Stalford:** No.

We have to give our people an assurance, and we must not encourage public panic. I am not suggesting that the Chair of the Health Committee has done that, but other utterances over time have added to the anxiety and the legitimately held concerns of parents and teaching staff.

The Department of Education has various responsibilities. It is responsible for preschools,

primary schools, post-primary schools and special educational needs schools. It is responsible for youth policy, community relations inside and between schools, and it is responsible for teacher education and salaries. It is not responsible for public health. This is a public health issue, and, therefore, it is right that the Health Department and the Public Health Agency have been brought in to assist in the matter because it is outwith the core vires of the Department of Education to deal with a public health issue.

I welcome the cooperation between Minister McIlveen and Minister Swann. They have demonstrated what Executive cooperation should look like, because there are issues that are cross-departmental in nature. I welcome the fact that practical solutions are now being put in place. I know that other Members, including Mr Sheehan in the past, have expressed concern about the capacity of the Public Health Agency to carry out its functions. I understand and accept that, but it will be our job to hold the PHA's feet to the fire on those issues in order to ensure the best outcomes.

It is important, however, to recognise the fact that legitimate concerns have been raised and that the Minister is moving to address them. The worst thing that we could do on an occasion like this is to frighten people and make them afraid to send their children to school. Schooling and classroom learning is so important, and we are now in a situation in this country where there are kids in P3 who have not had a full year of schooling. That cannot go on.

**Mr McNulty:** I want to begin by recognising that we are 20 years on from that terrible day on 11 September 2001, when terrorists flew jetliners into the Twin Towers in downtown Manhattan and into the Pentagon. We all know someone, or someone whose auntie or nephew or cousin, who died on that fateful day. I want to offer my sympathies of the families of the more than 3,000 people who lost their lives on that terrible day. Go raibh solas na bhFlaitheas orthu.

This week, 18 months since the onset of the pandemic, I spoke to a number of principals across my constituency, in mainstream and special schools. Those conversations highlighted and reinforced the challenges, concerns and fears of our school leaders. Our education system has been plunged into chaos, and schools feel that they have been totally abandoned by the Education Minister and her Department. I am stunned not only by the lack of leadership on display but by the abdication of

responsibility that has been demonstrated by those in positions of leadership.

A key area of contention has been the testing guidelines issued by the Department for the new academic year. Last year, those who tested positive, as well as those who were close contacts, were required to isolate for 10 days. This year, those close contacts can return to school if they provide a negative PCR test after two days, with an expectation that they will take another PCR test on day eight. School principals have raised many concerns in relation to this guidance.

There is a critical issue with the supply of and access to PCR tests.

**Mr Lyttle:** Would the Member give way briefly?

**Mr McNulty:** Of course.

**Mr Lyttle:** Just to repost that question. The legitimate question that is being asked of me, and I presume of the Member as well, is can we get a clear communication of the safety with regards to children returning to school when they are PCR-negative after day two? There may be a legitimate answer to that question but we just do not seem to be able to get it for some reason.

I thank the Member for giving way.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Mr McNulty:** The Member makes a valid point. That issue does create further chaos because, instead of having to isolate for 10 days, some pupils may actually end up having to isolate for 30 days because of that system.

Although some pupils are checking on their mobile phones as soon as they have been sent home to try to get a PCR test, they find that they can only access a PCR test in Enniskillen or even Wales in some instances. The lateral flow tests are not being accepted as an appropriate mechanism for establishing COVID-positive status, and principals are a bit confused as to why they cannot be utilised more readily. However, they are not laboratory tests, so are not as reliable as the PCR tests.

Schools principals also told me that there are a huge number of instances in which staff are testing negative after the day two PCR test and testing positive on day eight, thus plunging the school community into deeper chaos. As I said, some children are being forced to miss more

school than they would if they had to isolate for only 10 days.

Principals cannot understand how teachers can teach a class in the classroom and simultaneously teach a class remotely. It is just an impossibility. Principals, teachers and parents are worried about having someone who has received a positive PCR test at home while their sibling or siblings are able to go to school. How can that stand up to scrutiny or make sense?

When challenged yesterday at the Education Committee on these guidelines and their efficacy, departmental officials were reluctant to offer clear guidance because they did not want to speak as to what the health experts might say. If senior government officials are unable to provide clear insight into these issues, how are school principals expected to do so? In fact, when pressed, one departmental official said that updates in guidance in relation to testing was being tweeted out, I think sent to schools at the end of the summer, and was sent through the normal channels. That, to me, does not seem normal. In these extraordinary and unprecedented times, that seems to me to be bizarre.

Many educators are having the entirety of their working day, indeed their evenings and weekends, consumed by directing the administration of COVID cases, close contacts and issues with testing at their schools. I welcome the belated move to allow the PHA to now take control of contact tracing, but there is still an enormous administrative burden in switching that across. That does not just happen by flicking a switch.

School communities have been left to fend for themselves without adequate resources or proper leadership from the Department. We have been in the grips of COVID for 18 months now, so the question has to be asked: why on earth did the Minister and her Department not anticipate these challenges coming down the tracks?

Why did the Minister and her Department not take every step possible to provide the necessary strategic leadership and adequate administrative resourcing to ensure that, rather than serving as COVID administrators, schools could actually focus their energy on being educators?

**1.00 pm**

Another critical issue at play here is the unavailability of teaching and support staff. That has been exacerbated by the GTCNI registration debacle. That has caused enormous problems in relation to not just teaching staff but classroom assistants and all the staffing mechanisms in the school, including cooks, chefs etc. I know that that is not necessarily a GTCNI function, but resource is a major issue there in terms of access to staff.

One principal described her day on Monday as being a "day from hell". Her entire energy was focused on contact tracing. The lack of leadership on show from the Department has been typified by the laissez-faire approach to these critical issues and is posing a clear threat to the long-term education of our children and young people. To add insult to injury, any feeble supports that have been offered to schools have been inaccessible.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Dr Aiken:** As I begin, I make a declaration of interest as being a member of the board of governors at a primary school in my constituency and, as unlikely as it may seem, the parent of two primary-school teachers; sorry, students. *[Laughter.]* Well, they do teach me an awful lot, I can assure you of that. Every single day.

The welcome return of pupils to school and the restoration of normal teaching, especially for those pupils approaching key exams, has been a key objective of our party and, indeed, everybody in the Assembly. Indeed, our Health Minister has been at the forefront, in the Executive, of putting forward practical approaches, along with the Public Health Agency, the Department of Education and the EA, to allow the safe and managed return of pupils.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Member for giving way briefly. Will the Member accept that there may be a need for enhanced communication around some of the scientific and medical rationale for some of the policies that have been put in place to balance safety and attendance in schools?

**Dr Aiken:** Thank you very much indeed.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute.

**Dr Aiken:** Mr Lyttle has obviously had the opportunity to read some of my notes as I have been going through them. Great minds think alike, but at least we do anyhow.

However, it must be recognised that, throughout the pandemic, the flow of information — there we go — from the Department of Education, through the EA, has, on many occasions, been less than exemplary. Regrettably, even I, as a member of a board of governors and someone with an insight into actual health guidance — at one stage, I had a direct line to the Health Minister — have found it difficult to translate what was agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Public Health Agency into the information that managed to work its way into the Department of Education and Education Authority and then work its way down to schools. Regrettably, it is perhaps not coincidental that some teachers, after 18 months of less than, I am afraid, clear guidance, are deciding to interpret the rules in their own way.

The Minister now has the opportunity to put that right. She has the information that she needs from our Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), she has the support of the Public Health Agency, and, in our Health Minister, she has somebody who is committed to the health and well-being of our children. She can also better inform her party colleagues in the Executive on the provision of testing in schools, can update them on the widespread availability of lateral flow tests and, above all, has the opportunity to look critically at the information flow to our schools to ensure that there is no longer confusion or inconsistencies in the public health messages to our pupils, parents and hard-pressed school staff.

To conclude, Minister, while there are other growing crises around our political spectrum, on this issue, by utilising the support already offered yesterday by our Health Minister, you can regain some much-needed trust by getting your Department to take effective action for the pupils, teachers and parents across Northern Ireland. We can all work together to make this happen.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the next Member, I want to say that I will use the extended period allowed under the grace period to make sure that all remaining Members have an opportunity to contribute to the debate. However, if anybody takes an intervention, they will not get an additional minute. That is just to facilitate all remaining Members.

**Mr Buckley:** As I begin to speak on this important matter, I pay tribute to teachers, principals, staff, parents and, indeed, pupils.

It has no doubt been a difficult time for them, both in the classroom —.

**A Member:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Buckley:** I do not have an extra minute, so no.

It has been a difficult time for them in the classroom and, indeed, for many parents.

My position and that of Minister McIlveen and my party is clear: I want to see a continuous stream of our young people in our schools and classrooms getting the face-to-face learning that they so desperately need. You would forgive me for thinking, listening to some of the Members' comments, that they did not remember the devastating impact of a lack of face-to-face teaching in the past 18 months. Did they remember the rise in domestic violence, anxiety and mental health issues? We all know the benefits of face-to-face teaching. We know that it is essential for our young people's physical and mental well-being that they get that classroom, face-to-face learning. That is why it is so important that we be careful with the language used in the House. Mr McCrossan's "angry man of education" will get him only so far. It may help him get the air waves, but it will do nothing to provide solutions to parents, teachers and young people; in fact, I will go as far as to say that it raises our parents', teachers' and pupils' anxiety. It is time to calm the rhetoric. Some of the comments today have been irresponsible.

From meeting with local teachers, as I have done, and listening to parents, as we all have done, the messaging has been clear. First, teachers and principals were talking about the COVID workload. I recognise that, as the Minister has. Through deliberations and through contact with teachers and the Health Minister, that issue has been addressed by giving responsibility to the PHA. I will say — Mr Sheehan will not be new to the topic — that there is some concern about capacity in the PHA. That will have to be scrutinised by both the Health and Education Committees if we are to find an amenable way forward. I want the teachers to be able to teach. Removing the requirement to test and contact-trace is essential to that.

The PHA's messaging was also mentioned. One principal described it to me as "terrible". There has been a constant lack of information flowing to teachers and an array of messaging that meant different things to different people. We need clear, simple messaging, and that goes to the heart of what the Chair of the

Education Committee is talking about regarding that communication chain. Teachers also talked about the availability of testing. We need to consider that.

I will refer to one thing that has not been mentioned today. Teachers and parents have raised with me the constant cycle of testing. It is important to note that our schools are safe. Many of those who are isolating at home are at home not because they have COVID but because they have been sent home, whether they have been part of an isolation block or whatever. They do not have COVID, and it is important that we instil a bit of confidence in our parents and teachers that that is not the case. That is why I say that we need to look at the use of lateral flow testing to see whether it can give confidence. Some Members will shake their heads and say that it is not as accurate. I accept that it is not as accurate, but the NHS website talks about it having 99.9% accuracy. If it is good enough at entrances to emergency departments, for daily use in care homes, for plane travel in the common travel area and for businesses, concerts and football, why not in schools? We have to recognise that a PCR test is an extremely intrusive way for our young people to find results for COVID-19. I know some young people who have been traumatised when they have got a day two test and have had to wait for day eight. We need to bear that in mind. A lateral flow test is less intrusive and quicker. It is time to have a managed and rational debate around testing.

The Minister has not risen to the political baiting from some in the Chamber. Minister McIlveen has not added a voice of hysteria on this sensitive matter; instead, she has got on with the job, in lockstep with the Minister of Health, to provide a calm and reassuring voice. Yes, there will be problems, and I have no doubt that we will revisit the subject —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Buckley:** — but we must be calm and rational when dealing with issues —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Buckley:** — as important as education.

**Ms Armstrong:** I have five minutes, so I will not be taking interventions.

**A Member:** [*Inaudible.*]

**Ms Armstrong:** I know.

In advance of the recall, I contacted a number of principals to ask them how the back-to-school situation was going. I am not here to moan, which Mr Newton mentioned earlier; I am here to provide their voice. I asked the principals to give me some of their words and reflections. Some of this you will recognise, and it will back up what others have said today.

All the principals wanted me to make it clear that, while there has been such bad press about schools and the COVID situation, teachers and school leaders continue to prioritise pupil welfare. Teachers comply with clear and understandable communications. As others have said today, Minister, it comes down to this: it is clear and understandable communication, which has not been going to them, about which they have concerns. One primary-school principal in the constituency that the Minister and I share sent me these words:

*"unfortunately, it has been anything but a smooth return to school as I have had to close the school yesterday and today."*

That was Tuesday and Wednesday of this week. The principal continued:

*"Yesterday I only had 6 available members of staff out of 18 and we are sitting at over 20+ pupils positive out of 115"*

in the whole school. The principal confirmed:

*"We had a local principals' meeting yesterday and we all expressed our concerns over the following:*

*Use of Lateral Flow Tests v PCRs - the message has not been clear enough and parents think that a negative LFT is enough evidence for pupils to return. The PHA guidelines are too confusing for a lot of parents (they have obviously been written by professionals for professionals)."*

The principal said that some politicians':

*"ridiculous, inappropriate interventions have only made things worse for principals. Unfortunately, there have been a lot of cases where parents have been aggressive and confrontational with principals due to this lack of clarity."*

On household contacts, the principal said:

*"we are deeply concerned that pupils can attend school even though there is a positive Covid case in the household. The*

*guidelines state that the pupil can attend if they test negative on day 2 (and get tested again on day 8). However, schools have reported a large increase in positive results on day 8 - meaning that these pupils have been in school with the virus. Many schools, including the entire"*

— I will leave out the name so that I do not specify it —

*"Area Principals' Group, have insisted that all pupils isolate for 10 days if there is a positive household case. However, once again, this had led to conflict with parents.*

*We feel that there are some politicians are [sic] turning a 'blind eye' to what is happening in schools in a rush to open up the economy. However, there are children, staff and families with medical needs who are extremely anxious at present and need protected."*

The principal concluded:

*"I think that school leaders should have been consulted on these guidelines prior to their implementation!"*

I ask the Minister whether she can confirm how they were consulted before the guidelines were implemented.

Another post-primary-school principal outlined the challenges that their school faces:

*"In terms of how school is running, things have been extremely busy with the Covid response and in particular the workload associated with the track and trace process."*

We know that the PHA will now step in, but that principal went on to say that they have spent every evening and every weekend on this and are exhausted. The principal said that they are trying to follow the Department of Education and PHA guidance "to the letter" but there is:

*"inconsistency in the system - some schools are insisting close contacts self-isolate for 10 days and this is causing confusion amongst parents who want to know why there are variations between schools and are some schools safer than others?"*

Those are their words. The principal went on to say:

*"Some schools are also requesting that they see evidence of PCR tests but we have been told by DE that schools should not be policing this and that we work on the basis of trusting our parents which I have been doing.*

*The cases we dealt with last week meant that we were waiting for PCR test results to come through over the weekend so the whole leadership team and I all managed the Covid phone in shifts all weekend to respond to any positive cases."*

While the PHA will take that forward, can the Minister explain how that will work for teachers? Surely the teachers will be asked to provide the information to PHA, or will parents provide it through the teachers or go directly to the PHA? We need clear information.

The Minister allocated funding to manage the COVID response, with additional expenditure on hand sanitiser, additional cleaning and associated products, signage, teacher cover etc. We will not be long working through that, so I ask the Minister, alongside those principals, to consider how that will work.

The pressure on teachers will remain, even though the PHA will take on track and trace. Teachers will still have to provide solutions, options and advice to parents.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Ms Armstrong:** I ask the Minister to consider how to help those teachers.

**1.15 pm**

**Mr Chambers:** I have listened carefully to the debate today. Rightly, most Members highlighted the unbearable pressure that has been placed on teachers and principals. It is a fact that school staff have been placed in an intolerable position. I believe that all of us recognise the fact that our children are not mere statistics in this situation; they are suffering badly as well. With 11 grandchildren currently at various levels of our education system, I have been hearing about the impact on those children from their own mouths and from their parents. That is in addition to the many emails and phone calls from constituents. Two weeks into the new term, three of my grandchildren have been sent home from school because of a positive contact in their class. One, who had just started school in P1, was sent home on just his second day. What must be going through that young mind? One,

who is seven years of age, had to be held down by her mother to have a test carried out, which came back negative, so that she could get back to school. What terror will the second test hold for that child? The third child is due to take his transfer test in the coming months. He has already lost three days of education. Is that satisfactory preparation for such an important academic test? How can teachers create a schooling plan for their pupils?

There is evidence that the vast majority of close school contacts who were sent home to isolate during the 2020-21 school year did not go on to develop COVID. Vaccinating post-primary students, which has been mentioned today, is a discussion for another day. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has declined to give a definitive judgement, but it has invited the four UK Chief Medical Officers to discuss the issue and weigh up risk against benefit. We await the outcome of those discussions. Proposals to transfer tracing to the PHA will change the dynamics of the situation and help to calm the fears of school staff, parents and, importantly, our children. We all want what is best for our children. Transferring the tracing programme to the professionals is a step in the right direction.

**Mr Allister:** There is no doubt that our schools are in a very fraught situation. I know that as chair of the board of governors of my local primary school, and I declare that interest. Equally, there is no doubt that the present situation has not been functioning adequately, if at all. However, some Members who have spoken in the debate seem intent on whipping up fear about the safety of our schools. It sounds as though some would rather our schools were closed than anything else. That has to be fundamentally wrong.

This hokey-cokey business of being tested — being out of school for a test, back in and then back out for another test — is not working. I, like, I am sure, many other Members, have had so many parents getting in touch. One told me that their P6 pupil was sent home on Friday for a test, which took place on Sunday. On Monday, their P4 pupil was sent home for a test. On Tuesday, their P2 pupil was sent home for a test. On Tuesday afternoon, the P6 pupil was sent home for another test. Mr Chambers made a very pertinent point. He talked about the trauma that testing causes to young children, who, in most cases, will be COVID-free, and yet they are subjected to the invasive test, which builds within them a mountain of fear. That is an increasing problem. I have had parents say to me, "My child was terrorised by that. They won't go back to school. They don't

want to go back to school. They're scared of another". The parents are scared about what happens if another test is required. We are dealing with tender young lives. It is easy sometimes to forget that.

If our schools are to be open, and, clearly, they should be, the presumption must be that children attend school. Yes, this might be more radical, but I would have thought that the approach should be that a child who has symptoms is tested. If the test is positive, they stay at home for 10 days but the other children continue to attend school. If they show symptoms, they are tested; thereby, we maintain continuity of attendance for the far greater number in our schools and we alleviate many of the impossible burdens put upon our teachers.

I welcome the fact that the PHA is now going to test children, but I still have this residual query: are the teachers not still going to have the burden of supplying all the administrative work to the PHA? How is that going to work? It is important that we hear answers from the Minister on that specific point. We should be putting, first and foremost, education with the safety of our children. Our schools, overwhelmingly, are safe locations for our children. Therefore, I reject the idea that, at the first sign of someone anywhere in the class or school, having any sort of symptom, it is everyone out. That is not working, nor will it work.

**Ms Sugden:** Good afternoon, Members. I declare an interest as a governor of a primary school in my constituency.

I dismiss the comments of those Members who suggested that the issue has been dealt with. It has not, and I will outline the reasons why that is the case. This is a cross-departmental issue, and it requires the five parties to recognise that they are, indeed, one Executive. It is an issue for Education, Health, Economy and perhaps other Departments. I agree with Mr Allister that it is disappointing to see the parties of the Government at odds with one another in the debate. Those of you in those parties should be working together. I appreciate that it is the silly season, with an election pending. However, you still have a mandate until probably March 2022, and you need to take responsibility for doing the job that you all agreed to in January 2020.

I wish to represent the views of those who shared comments about what has been happening since the resumption of school in the past number of weeks. I will start with schools. I appreciate the change in relation to the PHA,

but the previous policy placed a significant burden on principals and school leaders. I will quote directly from schools that contacted me earlier this week. They said that the support offered to schools was "wholly inadequate". That is damning, and, sadly, it is a familiar criticism. It seems to be the criticism that we have heard throughout the past year, with schools saying that the support just was not present. That is certainly something that we need to reflect on.

I agree with other Members that this, essentially, is a communications issue. Schools are fully aware of the issues relating to their pupils, and they are willing to do what they can to try to support them, but they need support from the Government. I implore the Executive to look at their communications. It is not enough to say now, a year in, that this is unprecedented. They have had a year to try to improve. It is something that we genuinely need to get a grip on.

The other concern that I hear from parents, and Members who spoke before me mentioned this as well, is that the experience at the PCR testing centres is "horrific". Very young children are being subjected to an invasive test, where they are screaming. What are we doing to children that means that, because of current policy on contact tracing and testing, we are subjecting them to that type of testing potentially once a week? That is in cases where they can even get a PCR test. A parent who talked to me this morning said that she tried to book a test but that, because the PCR centres are so overwhelmed, she was unable to get it. She had to travel to Magherafelt to get a test that, as in most cases, was going to be negative.

I agree with Mr McCrossan on the situation around day two and day eight testing. There could be a negative test on day two, and those kids could be sent back in to school where they could infect others because they had not presented a positive test. On day eight, they could be told that they have a positive test, which means that everyone else in that classroom will then have to take a day off school and take a test the following day. We are perpetuating a cycle in which kids are being tested regularly, and I do not think that that is good for their well-being, particularly if we consider the risk around COVID-19 for young people in particular. I will not claim to be an expert on the effects of that, but we need to consider whether our approach is disproportionate to the risk that we are now facing in schools.

I want to make a point about parents. We are no longer in a lockdown situation. Parents do not have the flexibility to take time off work. That is why it is an Economy issue. How are we supporting working parents when they have to take their kid to get a test, perhaps several hours away from their place of work or even from their home because they cannot get one locally because the system is overwhelmed? Will employers be sympathetic to that? A year on, I think that the answer is no. We really need to get a grip on what we even mean by a close contact. I appreciate what a close contact might be for adults in an office environment, for example, but is it really the case that a close contact has to be in a classroom situation? Indeed, I ask the Minister of Health and the wider Northern Ireland Executive to reconsider these definitions.

We will be dealing with this issue moving forward because, while the administration and burden has been taken off principals — that seems to be the focus of a lot of the concerns this week — we need to look at the issue in the wider context of what it means for parents and children and at how we learn to live with COVID-19 in the community. Nearly a year ago now, I heard the previous First Minister say that we need to move towards a process by which we look at this. I ask the Executive to do that. I do not underestimate the challenges.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Ms Sugden:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister of Education, Miss Michelle McIlveen, has 15 minutes to respond.

**Miss McIlveen (The Minister of Education):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have listened to the views that Members have expressed on the motion, and it is clear that all those present, including me, want children to access their education in a safe environment. The high community prevalence of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland has led to an increased number of cases being reported by schools and a large number of children being identified as close contacts and asked to isolate and book a PCR test. That has resulted in major disruption to children's education. It is acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular school closures and COVID-related absences, has been very damaging to the well-being of children, including their mental health, education and long-term opportunities for future employment and development. Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds have been particularly impacted. Many Members pointed

to that, and we have worked hard to minimise the impact on pupils. I also recognise the challenges faced by families in having to manage children who are out of school either ill or self-isolating. It has to be a priority for all of us to have children in school, where, we all agree, they should be. In particular, I recognise the work undertaken by school leaders and their boards of governors and staff since the start of the new academic year in supporting contact tracing. For many, this has been a very challenging time, with a lot of work undertaken over evenings and weekends to ensure that close contacts were identified.

Schools were provided not only with guidance from the Department but with detailed advice from the PHA on the close-contact and self-isolation and testing processes. My Department's guidance reflected the agreed Executive position, which is based on expert medical and scientific advice. The guidance itself was the subject of detailed engagement with officials from the Department of Health over the summer and took account of their views across a number of areas. My officials also worked closely with the practitioners group of school leaders and maintained engagement with trade unions. The Department's guidance seeks to move away from the position in which school leaders and staff were required to follow a detailed list of prescriptive requirements, often telling principals what either must or cannot happen in their school.

That reflects the progress and learning that we have all had in society in areas such as the use of face coverings, hand hygiene and testing since the start of the pandemic.

### **1.30 pm**

The guidance also seeks to take advantage of the experience that has been developed by schools over the past 18 months. Principals have learnt what has worked well in their school and what has worked less well. Where there is an opportunity to allow them to tailor their actions and mitigations to suit their school's individual circumstances, it is appropriate to allow principals the flexibility to do so.

On 12 August, the Executive agreed that school bubbles would no longer be required in guidance and that face coverings should still be worn by post-primary-school pupils in classrooms, and they set out changes to self-isolation requirements. In addition, PHA guidance resulted in pupils identified as close contacts having to self-isolate only until a negative PCR test was received, rather than for

10 days. The Executive agreed to the proposals brought forward by the Minister of Health, which took account of the expert advice from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser.

Last week, Public Health Scotland published a research paper that examined the number of close contacts in schools who went on to test positive. It identified that only 7.9% of school-year pupil contacts of a positive case subsequently tested positive themselves. A daily contact-trace testing study in England that was published during the summer also found that, in the participating schools, only 1.6% of those identified as close contacts went on to become confirmed cases within 14 days. Those studies support the position taken by the Executive.

Since schools returned for the 2021-22 school year, the high community prevalence of COVID-19 has led to an increase in cases reported to schools, with large numbers of children being identified as school close contacts. That has caused disruption in schools, large numbers of children having to miss school, pressure on school leaders and a high volume of calls to the PHA, which has struggled to respond. However, with high rates of the virus currently in the community, the Department of Health and the Department of Education have recognised that the administrative burden on teachers is not sustainable.

Against that backdrop, my Department agreed with the Department of Health that schools would no longer be required to carry out the PHA's contact-tracing work and that only in certain circumstances would a school be asked to assist. That more targeted approach, which will begin on Friday, will involve the PHA contact-tracing service identifying and asking the very closest contacts — for example, very close friends — to isolate and get a test. Other contacts in school, such as those in the same class or who sit near the case, will not routinely be asked to isolate and book a test. School leaders will no longer be required to respond to every case and identify contacts. PHA will undertake the work and will contact the school principal for assistance only in limited circumstances. Parents will be asked to inform the school if their child tests positive, which could be part of school absence reporting. Detailed PHA guidance for schools will be prepared to support the revised approach. A warn and inform letter will be made available that schools may use to inform parents of cases in the school and to remind everyone of the steps that we all should take to reduce the risk of COVID transmission in school and beyond.

PHA will monitor the number of cases in schools and will continue to have arrangements to respond to and support schools with large clusters and outbreaks. The proposed approach is in line with the position being taken in schools in England, Scotland and Wales. Schools should continue to focus on the range of mitigations that they have in place to reduce the risk of COVID transmission, including cleaning, ventilation, face coverings, consistent groups and regular asymptomatic testing using lateral flow devices. Vaccination is available to all staff and some students.

A separate arrangement for special schools will be implemented that takes account of the particular needs and vulnerabilities of those settings. While the overall burden will still be reduced, PHA risk assessments may mean that special-school principals are contacted more frequently about cases than their mainstream school colleagues.

This is a small, operational change to the PHA process that will have a positive impact on school workload. It reflects the current evidence on the risks posed to close contacts, and it will result in fewer pupils having to isolate.

I understand and accept that there have been and will continue to be difficult decisions to take on how best to support pupils and schools during the pandemic. There is a wide spectrum of opinion across stakeholders and society on how that should be taken forward. There are still disruptions to normal school life, such as post-primary pupils being required to wear face coverings in classrooms. However, the Executive continue to be informed by the expert medical and scientific advice as they take decisions, in the same way that my Department relies on advice from the PHA and the Department of Health.

While there is no guidance or set of rules that will please everyone, I believe that my Department's revised COVID-19 guidance balances the need to keep all those in our schools safe with ensuring that they can access the full range of educational experiences. My Department's revised guidance seeks to allow school leaders to lead. It moves away from being prescriptive to being as permissive as the public health advice permits. As always, we will listen to teachers, unions, parents, pupils and school governors and take on board their views. We will continue to respond quickly and adapt guidance to reflect any changes to public health advice.

**Mr McNulty:** Will the Minister give way?

**Miss McIlveen:** I trust school leaders to consider the policy guidance provided by my Department, the self-isolation guidance provided by the PHA and the operational guidance provided by the EA. Helplines are also available for them to raise any queries. With that information, school leaders will then, rightly, be able to use a cautious, risk-based approach to the decisions involved in the everyday operation of their school.

I have heard today about the need to focus on the other mitigations in schools. I believe that we have a balanced approach in our guidance. My officials continue to engage with colleagues in other Administrations on the approach to ventilation, including the use of carbon dioxide monitors in certain circumstances. My Department will submit a bid for capital funding to support wider provision of CO2 monitors in schools.

**Mr Lyttle:** Will the Minister give way?

**Miss McIlveen:** I recognise the challenges presented by, in some instances, an ageing school estate. Last week, I met a school principal whose main building dates back to the 19th century and heard about the associated difficulties that he has with windows. We are working with EA to address those issues, and I hope that the experience will be the same across the school estate as the work is rolled out.

**Mr McNulty:** Will the Minister give way?

**Miss McIlveen:** We will also continue to engage with EA on issues such as cleaning services and the provision of additional support to school leaders who need it.

I am mindful that, while we believe that our measures are sustainable and schools will remain open, we must accept that local issues may need to be addressed. Should there ever be a need for measures at the regional level, we have well understood escalation measures that were in place last year that we can reinstate.

As I said at the start of my speech, I remain concerned about the impact of the pandemic on our children. I assure Members that I will continue to listen and act appropriately. A number of issues have been raised by colleagues today that fall within the remit of the Department of Health, particularly in respect of PCR testing; I give the assurance that I will raise them directly with it.

I am assured by advice that I have received from Health that the more targeted approach to contact tracing that has been agreed will result in fewer pupils having to self-isolate unnecessarily and that the range of mitigating measures will continue to ensure that pupils are safe in their school environment, being able to learn and socialise with their friends just as they should.

**Mr Speaker:** I did not want to interrupt the flow of the Minister's contribution, but it is not appropriate for Members to continue rising and seeking to make an intervention when it is clear that the Member is not agreeable to that. I just make that point. It starts to get rude.

I call Pat Sheehan to make a winding-up speech. The Member has 10 minutes.

**Mr Sheehan:** I had no desire to propose the motion and, in the process, trigger the recall of the Assembly. The motion is not a personal attack on the Education Minister, and nor is it an attack on her because she is a member of the DUP. I tabled the motion because of the sheer number of school leaders, teachers and union reps who had contacted me about the situation in our schools, asking me to do something. I therefore thought it was important to bring the Minister to the Chamber and for us as MLAs to hold her to account.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Deputy Chairperson for giving way briefly. It is to be noted that the first piece of detailed information on the issues required an Assembly recall. The fact that a Minister will not take interventions and questions during a statement is of profound concern.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thanks for that intervention.

I will start on one point of agreement.

**Mr McNulty:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Sheehan:** Let me get into this for a few minutes, and then I will let you in, Justin.

Everyone here agrees that the best place for our children is in school. Everyone agrees with that. Our teachers and principals should be able to educate those children with as little disruption as possible. Classroom assistants, lunch supervisors, cooks, playground supervisors, bus drivers, caretakers and all those who provide support in our schools should be able to do their jobs in an environment that is as safe as it can be. Parents need to feel confident that their children are safe in school and that their

education will be disrupted only if it is absolutely necessary.

Unfortunately, there appears to have been little planning to ensure the safe restart of schools. What was done was confusing and woefully inadequate, and that was despite the warnings from experts over the last few weeks, if not months, that the return of children to school would lead to an increase in already high numbers of positive COVID-19 cases in society. Proactive interventions were required from the Minister; instead, she took a completely hands-off approach and placed the burden of responsibility for dealing with coronavirus in schools on the shoulders of our school leaders.

I am sure that the Minister, like the rest of us, has heard school leaders, union representatives and parents in the media over the past week or two. I will say this to the DUP reps who have spoken today: there is almost an implication in what you say that school leaders are overstating their concerns about what is happening in our schools.

**Mr Buckley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Sheehan:** Not just yet. I will let you in when I get through a bit more of this.

I am sure that the Minister has heard the anger, frustration and demoralisation among school leaders and the sheer disappointment at her approach and the approach of her Department.

I will let Justin in at that point.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Member for giving way.

First, it is not rude for me to be persistent about representing the concerns of my constituents. Secondly —

**Mr Stalford:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Member is veering dangerously close to questioning rulings from the Chair. Can you direct him that that is inappropriate?

**Mr Speaker:** I was just coming to that. You were very quick.

Mr McNulty, will you take your seat, please? I made a comment a few minutes ago that I stand by and will insist on in the future. Whether the Minister should have responded is a separate question. The fact of the matter is that you, as one Member in the Chamber, repeatedly tried to insert yourself into an intervention when it was clear that the Member

you were asking was not prepared to concede that. On that basis, you should have desisted from that, and I will insist that you do that in future. Please do not question the ruling of the Speaker. Resume your position.

**Mr McNulty:** Thank you for that clarification. I maintain that I was not being rude. Apologies for that, Mr Speaker.

Will the Member agree that teachers, pupils and staff want consistency, clarity and guidance; adequate resources and support; access to testing when and where it is needed; and the ability to continue safely with their education?

**Mr Sheehan:** I agree with all of that. I want to go on to the issues that have arisen and been raised since schools have reopened, I presume, with all of us by teachers, school leaders, trade union representatives, parents or whoever.

**1.45 pm**

First, there is the issue of contact tracing. As has been mentioned, unlike in other jurisdictions, the responsibility for contact tracing here falls to school leaders. In other jurisdictions, the equivalent of the PHA carries it out. I have lost count of the number of school principals who have said that they have spent their weekends and evenings involved in contact tracing. That is not their job. They are being taken away from their core duty and responsibility of educating and safeguarding children.

There have been problems with getting tests for children who have come into close contact with a positive case. I spoke to one principal in my constituency — in the Falls, which is a deprived area — who was trying to get tests for a number of children who were close contacts of someone. They were being directed to Castlewellan, while others were being directed to Derry and others to Enniskillen. Of course, you might say, "Testing is the responsibility of the Health Department and the PHA. Why blame the Education Department?". As have a couple of Members who spoke, I have serious issues with the PHA, and I locked horns with its representatives on a number of occasions when I was on the Health Committee. I am not here today to focus on the PHA's inadequacies — that is for others to deal with — but it emerged yesterday at the Education Committee that there had been no discussions whatsoever between the Education Department and the PHA in the run-up to the restart of schools. Why did the Education Department not make sure that there was sufficient testing capacity to deal

with any upsurge in numbers? Why did it not argue for a bespoke testing regime for schools?

**Mr Buckley:** I thank the Member for giving way. The issue of the PHA and testing is one that he has raised on numerous occasions.

Far from dismissing their concerns, I can reassure the Member and the House that listening to teachers' concerns was a priority, and, given the COVID workload that they had highlighted, it was vital that that be addressed. We have now gone some way to addressing that by moving to the PHA for contact tracing.

Does the Member agree that the PHA messaging is an area of serious concern for many teachers and parents and that, if we are to deal with that issue going forward, capacity and information must be free-flowing? Does he further agree that the Committee for Education and the Committee for Health should come together to scrutinise the PHA's work on that?

**Mr Sheehan:** I agree with that. It is very disappointing that the PHA has been absent from the media over the past while.

Another issue that emerged at the Committee yesterday was that no planning has taken place for forthcoming exams, including GCSE modules and post-primary transfer, should there continue to be disruption in schools. Parents, teachers and children are impatient waiting for direction on the issue. Why, for example, should P7 pupils this year be treated differently from P7 pupils last year? Where are the contingency plans?

**Mr McCrossan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Sheehan:** Quickly.

**Mr McCrossan:** I totally agree with the Member, and I hope that he will agree that what we heard yesterday at the Committee suggests that there is, in fact, no contingency planning: in the event of x, we will get y. Where is the plan to protect our children's education? Does the Member agree that that is a worrying situation?

**Mr Sheehan:** Absolutely. On other mitigations that could have been made in schools for the restart, the only mitigation outside of the general advice that is offered to everyone was that schools should open their windows. How does that work? The Minister herself raised a case, and I was speaking to someone the other day about a school where the windows are painted shut because the school is so old and there are that many layers of paint on the

windows that they cannot open. What happens with opening windows on a day of gale-force winds and driving rain? Wales, as we have heard, has already made £6 million available for carbon dioxide monitors and air-filtration systems.

Those are issues that should have been dealt with but were not. One of the big complaints from the schools that I have spoken to on the issue is that the guidance is unclear and, in some cases, contradictory. The aim of the guidance, according to the papers that we received yesterday, was to:

*“support schools to provide the best possible education and service to children and young people while reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the setting”.*

Clearly, the Minister has failed in that respect. Another aim was to:

*“provide clarity with regard to practical approaches for the safe operation of schools”.*

There is absolutely no clarity. There is confusion and chaos. Today, we are talking about how we will deal with the situation. I acknowledge that the Minister has taken some steps to deal with a number of the issues that have been raised, but it will take a lot more than what has been done.

While we are here discussing how to deal with problems, outside the Assembly, others are talking about trailing down the institutions. They are doing so at a time when we are in a pandemic crisis, when benefits are to be cut, taxes raised —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Sheehan:** — and the most deprived in society disadvantaged further.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Mr Sheehan:** It is time for us to get to work —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up. Thank you.

**Mr Sheehan:** — and do the job for our constituents.

*Question put.*

**Some Members:** Aye.

**Some Members:** No.

**Mr Speaker:** Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put again in three minutes.

*Question put a second time.*

**Some Members:** Aye.

**Some Members:** No.

**Mr Speaker:** Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I remind all Members of the requirement for social distancing while the Division takes place.

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 41; Noes 29.*

## **AYES**

*Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Ms Á Murphy, Mr C Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Brogan and Mr Sheehan*

## **NOES**

*Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Stalford and Mr Wells*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly expresses its significant concern with increasing reports of pupil absences due to the COVID-19 situation in our schools; recognises that this situation has been worsened by the failure of the Minister of Education to develop clear and robust guidance for our school staff; notes the scale of the burden that this has placed on many of our principals and teachers; and calls on the Minister of Education to work urgently with the Public Health Agency (PHA) to issue guidance that is cognisant of the unique circumstances of the school setting in the context of COVID-19.*

**Mr Speaker:** I thank all Members for their participation in the debate. Thank you all.

*Adjourned at 2.12 pm.*

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