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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 January 2022

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: This item of business will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 10 January 2022.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 10 January 2022.

Private Members' Business

Keeping Schools Open and Safe

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 keeping schools open and safe.

Mr Sheehan: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its support for keeping schools open and operating in a manner that is safe for pupils, parents, teachers and staff; further expresses serious concern at the lack of planning by the Minister of Education to ensure the safe reopening of schools in the context of the increased transmissibility of the omicron COVID-19 variant; recognises the staffing pressures that increased transmissibility will present for schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to urgently develop a plan that puts the safety of pupils and staff first, through the installation of air monitoring and air filtration devices in all classrooms, and addresses the staffing pressures facing the education system by utilising and deploying additional teaching capacity to keep schools open and safe.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate.

I want to preface any remarks that I make by saying that we are not two weeks into the pandemic, we are not two months into the pandemic, we are two years into it. The reason for bringing the Assembly back was to give a voice to school staff, parents and students to

express their frustration about the way in which things have been handled in schools to date. This situation was entirely predictable. This is also about accountability and the Assembly holding the Minister to account.

I want to deal with a number of issues, and I will try to get through as many of them as I can. There is the lack of adequate cover for teachers who are absent due to the pandemic and COVID-19 or other sickness or having to care for family members. There are the issues of ventilation, contingency plans for examinations, contact tracing and other potential mitigations. I accept that there is no silver bullet or panacea, but I will argue that there needs to be a combination of measures, a range of mitigations, that can be introduced in schools that can make them safer for staff and students.

The first issue that I want to deal with is substitute teachers and the lack of adequate cover that there has been. On 17 December, I made the point to the Minister, that no call had been made for retired teachers to come back into the system in the same way that the NHS, at the outset of the pandemic, asked for retired doctors, nurses and other staff to come back in. So, I was glad to see the Minister finally listen to what was being said. Unfortunately, she made that call only two days before Christmas.

A significant number of teachers in the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), the Department of Education, the Education Authority (EA) and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) are at desk jobs, and they could be redeployed into pupil-facing roles to relieve the stress on schools at the minute, and we could have the deployment of final-year students into the classroom.

I wrote to the Minister on 4 December about that issue, and I finally received a response on 6 January. I was given a long list of excuses as to why student teachers could not be deployed in the classroom. One was that any enhanced teaching role could see students falling in between employer and higher education institutions' liability insurance cover, leaving them legally vulnerable. Really, Minister? Are you telling the Assembly that your Department could not liaise with the higher education —

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you direct the Member that all remarks should be directed through yourself?

Mr Speaker: Yes, I will. All Members should make their remarks through the Chair, please. Thank you.

Mr Sheehan: Is the Minister really telling us, a Cheann Comhairle, that her Department could not sit down with the higher education institutions and organise insurance for student teachers coming into the classroom? Is that beyond the Department's capacity?

It is also the case that the NI substitute teacher register (NISTR) needs to be updated. I have been inundated with calls from principals who are having real difficulty getting substitute teachers. One principal phoned five people on the list, and each told her that they were already in full-time employment. We know there is a real debacle with the General Teaching Council NI (GTCNI). That became really clear after the summer but has been a problem for a number of years. NISTR needs to be updated.

I want to move on to the issue of ventilation in classrooms.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: I will give way briefly.

Mr McCrossan: I will be very brief, and I thank the Member for giving way.

In relation to attracting former teachers back temporarily to alleviate pressure, when the health service sought to bring retired staff back to alleviate pressure, it had the foresight to modify pension rights and pay scales to ensure fairness. At the minute, that is not going to be the case for retired teachers, therefore their pensions could be affected significantly. Does the Member agree that it is a great pity that the Department did not have the foresight to deal with that as well to attract people back? There is no incentive.

Mr Sheehan: I absolutely agree. There has been no forward planning whatsoever.

I move on to the issue of ventilation and air filtration systems. This is not new technology, but it is proven technology. It is used in laboratories, operating theatres and on aircraft to purify the air. No one is suggesting, again, that this is a silver bullet and that it will resolve all the issues, but it is a device that could help to provide cleaner air in classrooms and therefore make the environment safer for children and staff. The issue of funding has been raised. The Minister knows the process for obtaining funding. It is her responsibility to cost these devices and then submit a funding bid to the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Finance will then bring it to the Executive, and the Executive will decide what funding to

allocate. Even if there is not sufficient funding to put air filtration devices in every classroom in the North, she should start with the most vulnerable and put these devices into classrooms in special schools, where our children are vulnerable and where the contact is closest with teachers, and then primary schools, where pupils are not wearing masks.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: I will give way very briefly.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member's giving way very briefly.

Is the Member aware that, this month, the Sinn Féin Finance Minister proposed a 2% cut to the Education budget for 2022-25? In that context, how can he stand on his feet and demand more funding?

Mr Sheehan: I am aware of that. I am also aware that there is a monitoring round in January, and perhaps some funding will become available then.

Let us start with special schools and then primary schools, but the important thing is this: let us have a plan and let us provide teachers with better protection than they already have. Let us provide filtering face piece 2 (FFP2) masks, because the evidence and the science shows us that there is a greater decrease in transmission when people are wearing FFP2 masks.

I move on to exams. There has been significant disruption already in our schools, and, in all likelihood, there will be more disruption over the next weeks and months. The Minister needs to bring forward contingency plans similar to those that were used last year. However, what she also needs to take account of is that there will be uneven disruption across the sector. Some pupils and some schools will be affected more than others, and it is important to ensure that individual students are not disadvantaged. Any assessment tool needs to allow teachers to take account of how individual learning has been disrupted among their students. Furthermore, there need to be immediate discussions between the Department, CCEA and the unions — the teachers' representatives — to design contingency plans for our students in the time ahead.

With regard to contact tracing, there have been problems since schools restarted after the summer. There needs to be meaningful contact tracing in our schools, and isolation guidance

should be reinstated. Bubbles in classrooms should be reintroduced.

Let me be very clear about this: the responsibility for the safe operation of our schools lies entirely with the Education Minister. Two years into the pandemic, she has no plan, she has made no proposals, she has brought nothing to the Executive and she has not asked for money for air filtration systems. That is her responsibility as Education Minister, and she has totally failed that basic test. Opening windows in classrooms will not cut it. While our children are shivering in their classrooms, the Minister is dithering in the Department. It is time for action. It is time for action now.

12.15 pm

Mr Newton: I oppose the motion.

I thank every school principal and every member of teaching staff and school support staff for all their dedicated work on behalf of our children and society. Like everyone else in the Chamber —

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Robin, please move closer to the microphone. We are not picking you up. Thank you.

Mr Newton: I hope that I get that additional 15 seconds, Mr Speaker.

Like every Member in the Chamber, I have been contacted by parents who have concerns about their children in school and want to ensure that they are safe. Why would that not be the case? We are in a pandemic. Parents want to know that their children can go to school, schools will be open for them and children will receive face-to-face classroom teaching and be able to mix with their peers. Parents want those things because of their concern for their children's education and physical and mental health. Schools and parents deserve the support of everyone, and every party, across the Chamber.

School principals want to ensure that pupils and staff are safe, and they need support from the EA and DE and effective communication and support from politicians. They do not need negative motion after negative motion. They deserve support from the politicians similar to that offered to the Health Minister. By and large, the Health Minister enjoys the support of the Chamber — collective and cross-party support. He does not receive negative motion after negative motion, or cynical motion after cynical motion, as are used to attack the Education

Minister, whether this Minister or the previous one, Mr Peter Weir.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He refers to cynicism. Does he agree that it is the very definition of cynicism to convey the message to parents that high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters will prevent the opening of windows in classrooms? That is blatantly not the case, and those who peddle that myth should withdraw it.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Others will take up that point.

Those who are expert in the field, including the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), indicated to schools prior to Christmas that they should not axe carol services or gathering together. He does not share the concern seemingly outlined by Mr Sheehan. Last week, Professor Young attended the Health Committee and indicated that children will get infected but it is likely to be mild infection, and we have to live with the virus.

Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, commenting on the motion for today's recall, said that parents and teachers deserve better than political posturing such as recalling the Assembly for little more than a political stunt. I agree with him. The hypocrisy of Sinn Féin's position became apparent in Mr Sheehan's car-crash interview last week on 'Good Morning Ulster'. The Sinn Féin Finance Minister has proposed a 2% cut to the Education budget for 2022-25, which the DUP opposes. It would mean an £84 million shortfall in the Education baseline. While Education would receive additional resource funding, that falls well short of the money that the Department needs to continue programmes such as Engage and others that have been very much welcomed by principals. In short, it means that, over the three-year planning period, the Department of Education would face, in year 1, a gap of £195 million, in year 2, a gap of £250 million and, in year 3, a gap of £300 million. The Sinn Féin Minister proposes to cut the Education budget, while the entire Sinn Féin Assembly group calls for the Education Minister to spend a massive amount of additional capital that she does not have.

What political dishonesty, duplicity and insincerity this is. Dr Paisley might have called it "crocodile tears".

I am sure that the Minister will spend wisely any money allocated by the Finance Minister. The pan-nationalist front that signed the motion — Sinn Féin, the SDLP and Alliance — is the coordinated group that, rather than wanting to work with the Minister during the pandemic, has sought to criticise, for political advantage, Minister McIlveen and former Minister Weir. A health crisis deserves a better response. Our parents, principals and pupils deserve practical and ongoing support.

I note that 95% of our schools have received CO2 monitors —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Newton: — and that an additional 5,000 will become available.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Newton: It is that type of support that will keep pupils safe.

Mr McCrossan: As SDLP education spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate, given the enormity of the issue and the need to ensure that children's education and safety in schools are brought to the top of the agenda in the House and to ensure the safety of all teachers and other staff, who have been dedicated to delivering first-class education against the backdrop of intolerable pressures on them over the course of the pandemic. I put on record my firm appreciation and that of the SDLP to all our teachers and school staff right across Northern Ireland who have been working tirelessly throughout to ensure that, despite the circumstances faced, all children can remain in school and stay safe.

I have to say at the outset that I am extremely disappointed at how this debate has gone. We are talking about children and young people, their education, teachers, classrooms and all the things that are so important at this time. We are accused of signing a pan-nationalist motion. For the Member's information, all children, all teachers and all schools in Northern Ireland are affected; it does not matter what walk of life they are from. Do not try to turn something as fundamental as children's education into a sectarian argument or bun fight, because that is not what this is. This is about children's education and about protecting them. That message needs to ring out loudly in the House. How dare anyone accuse me of signing a pan-nationalist motion. That is totally offensive. I do

not accept it, and I am sure that others across these Benches do not accept it either.

I signed the recall motion to bring the Assembly back today because we have been highlighting for months the fact that there has been a severe lack of planning and action taken to ensure that our classrooms and schools were safe for reopening after the holidays. We have warned about that consistently at the Education Committee, in the House and through correspondence with the Minister. I totally agree that it is vital that our schools be kept open. No one in the House disagrees with that, but that should only be and can only be done —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: No, I will not. I heard enough from the Member on Radio Ulster the other morning.

A Member: So did I.

Mr McCrossan: Up to now, many principals from across —

Mr Stalford: I heard enough from you. *[Inaudible]* plenty from you.

Mr Speaker: Order, Mr Stalford.

Mr McCrossan: That might as well be considered an intervention.

Up to now, many principals from across the North do not believe that it has been safe, and we have seen cohorts of children move to online learning due to the significant concerns expressed over the threat of the omicron variant in schools. Those concerns have gone largely unnoticed by the Department and the Minister. I feel that I am constantly repeating the need for an action plan for decisive action and leadership to ensure that schools can stay open and be safe. There are significant staffing shortages in schools, with many teachers off at the minute because they have caught the virus or are self-isolating due to being in close contact with someone who has it at school or at home. A proper plan has not been put in place to tackle staff absences. Simply contacting retired teachers on the last day of term before Christmas was not the silver bullet for the Department. There are also issues for retired teachers, because, if they come back, their pension could be significantly affected, given the demands required of them. Could the Department not have planned this better, given the months and months of concern expressed

by teachers, principals and Members of the House?

The negative effects of school and class closures not just on learning opportunities but, significantly, on the physical and mental well-being of our children are now well known. Reliance on digital learning is clearly a poor substitute. The Minister should have far more robust plans in place than those we see at present. Once again, our children and teachers have been failed. There is the spectre of exams being disrupted and groups of children, including those with special educational needs, being treated unfairly as they face exams once again, which are quickly coming around the corner. The Minister and her Department could have had far more robust mitigations in place to avoid that shocking scenario, but she is playing catch-up again, and our children have become collateral damage. That is not good enough, and our children deserve better. Equally, the SDLP believes that there is a need to draw up similar shortlists for other educational school staff, and we have written in great detail to the Minister about that. However, despite my constant calls for these reserve lists to be systematically put together, we have had only token gestures towards supporting schools. It is simply not good enough.

The argument for air filtration is well made. We need those systems in our schools. There is no disagreement about that. We have spoken about that with the Department, the Minister, the Education Authority, teachers and schools. Those systems are needed. Let us get this done. I am not here today to fire buns around the House, but I have to say that there needs to be a greater collective responsibility in the House from those who have led this place for 15 years — 15 years. If, at this stage, a simple conversation about the education of our children cannot happen between the First Minister and deputy First Minister — or the joint First Ministers — of the Assembly, we are on a hiding to nowhere. This needs to change. Children's education is the priority.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McCrossan: Keeping schools open is the priority, and keeping them safe is the priority.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Robbie Butler, let me remind Members that it is the new year. This is a very important debate, and the public are, hopefully, listening in. Maybe, when you hear some of the brickbats, you do not want them to be listening in. Nevertheless, I expect that a lot of people will be listening in to the conduct of

this debate and the outcome of it, so please remember that at all times. Let us behave ourselves in the Chamber today.

Mr Butler: Mr Speaker, hopefully, you will not have to direct those words to me during the debate.

First, I thank our principals, teachers and support staff for their monumental efforts to open our schools as safely as possible and for their efforts to keep our pupils safe and in school, which we all agree is the best place for them to be. There is now little doubt that one of the groups most negatively impacted by the pandemic has been our young people, particularly by the loss of face-to-face education and time spent with classmates and friends. The true cost of this will be calculated for years to come. We must also thank our young people for how they have responded to the health protection measures and constructively contributed to our societal battle to combat this virus. I also thank the proposer of the motion, Pat Sheehan, for the opportunity to reinforce the repeated calls from me and from the Education Committee to the Education Minister for a more focused and deliberate strategy to improve air quality and ventilation in schools.

If we cast our minds back just a couple of months, we recall that the emergence of the omicron variant made us all sit up and listen.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member's giving way. Unlike the previous contribution, his is not full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. If we are to discuss the installation of HEPA filters in schools, it is important that we have the accurate figures in front of us. The basic cost is £1,100 per filter plus a filter replacement of £300 — these are conservative estimates — and it is suggested by some experts that as many as three filters per classroom will be necessary. So, when people say on the radio that the cost is £140 per unit, they are talking absolute nonsense.

Mr Butler: I think the Member for his intervention

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Butler: May I have a minute and a half? That was quite an intervention.

If we cast our minds back just a couple of months, we recall that the emergence of the omicron variant made us all sit up and listen. Even early evidence told us that this was a

more transmissible variant, and, whilst the longer-term health impacts were unknown at that time, it was obvious that actions to mitigate harm were needed. We have certainly learnt enough, and the population across Northern Ireland have suffered enough, for us as legislators and decision makers to use the learning from before and to prepare better for the future. It could be argued that, across some parts of these jurisdictions and, to some extent, in the Republic, these concerns are being addressed. In England, for instance, an additional 7,000 air-cleaning units for educational settings have been announced. In Wales, money has been set aside specifically to deal with ventilation. In the Republic of Ireland, funding has been made available specifically to allow schools to purchase air filter systems for classrooms.

Whilst the omicron variant has refocused the discussion, it must be remembered that the advice about good ventilation and air quality in shared spaces is not new. In November 2020, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) published a paper on ventilation and air-cleaning devices, and that advice is still worthy of application. While scientific and medical knowledge on the virus itself is trying to keep pace with the speed of mutations, one of the constant and most valuable pieces of advice on how we protect ourselves and each other has been the need to prioritise and utilise that triumvirate of protection mitigations: time, distance and shielding. When we couple the triumvirate of mitigations with a high and increasing uptake of the vaccination programme, we can, hopefully, return to a more familiar cycle of living.

Some may have begun to believe that we are now at a phase where we can let our guard down. They are wrong.

We have learnt much from the phase that we are in, but, to continue on a trajectory of returning to normality, we must still do our best to mitigate the spread of infection of any and all strains of COVID. The vast majority of the population of Northern Ireland has adhered to the public health messaging by wearing masks when needed and not mixing socially when risk is highest and through their uptake of the vaccination programme. Regularly published data shows that, when we act together on the health advice, we see a decrease in the spread of the virus and in hospitalisations and, by default, an increase in our ability to function as normally as we can.

12.30 pm

For enclosed spaces where people mix in numbers, such as school classrooms, it is vital that every measure available is taken, not only to reduce the risk but to build confidence for those who work and learn there. The Minister recently said that she trusts our principals and teachers to do their best for our children, and, in respect of educational, pastoral and social matters, I wholeheartedly agree with her. They are exceptional in their service to ensure that each of our children develops to their full potential. It is also true, however, that, for our educators and support staff to do that, they need to be in an environment that is absolutely therapeutic, safe and conducive to achieving the intended outcomes. We have a school estate that is, in many cases, old and crumbling, with little in the way of new builds or school maintenance. In recent years, it has suffered as much as any area due to the pandemic.

All of that is known, of course, but what have we done about it? It is not the role of a principal or board of governors to assess the adequacy and safety of ventilation and air quality in any room, let alone a classroom. It is not the responsibility of a principal or board of governors to assess whether an air filter or air cleaner is required. It is the responsibility of the Minister of Education to ensure that the resources exist to adequately assess the need for and delivery of a ventilation strategy and equipment for every classroom in the country, as required.

Whilst the immediacy of the need for ventilation is proven and the point on that well made, so is the need for substitute teachers. It is good to read the stories from England of retired schoolteachers who have responded to the call and made themselves available to support schools as the time of need has arisen.

My time is running wonderfully short, so I will come to the last call of my speech. We have learnt that childcare is the absolute cornerstone of the functioning of all sectors, including education. I ask the Minister for an update on any ongoing work to ensure that financial support is in place for temporary closures of childcare facilities due to COVID-19.

I and the Ulster Unionist Party support today's motion.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion in support of COVID safety for everyone in our education sector. It reiterates the calls for air quality and ventilation measures made by my colleague and Executive Minister Naomi Long in the summer of 2020 and the

calls for action on the staff shortage crisis made by every teaching union at the Education Committee in December. The education sector deserves no less, and the Alliance Party continues to thank everyone in that sector in Northern Ireland for the courage and leadership that they have shown to maintain good education for our children and young people throughout the pandemic. We thank our children and young people for the sacrifices that they have made to keep so many of us safe during the pandemic.

It is said by many people today that COVID-19 is a mild disease. For many, particularly those who have sought vaccination, that may be correct. However, for others, COVID-19 continues to cause short- and long-term sickness, hospitalisation and death. It also continues to cause disruption to our schools, particularly the staff shortage crisis.

It is important that we continue to listen to the children and young people affected by COVID-19 and, indeed, those in our education sector. At the Education Committee, I had the privilege of referring to a letter from Rosie Pidgeon, aged 16, from east Belfast. Rosie had mild COVID-19 symptoms: a bit of a temperature and a headache. Three months on, the headache continues; it has never gone away. She continues to suffer from symptoms such as brain fog, pain, fatigue, insomnia, breathlessness, dizziness and a loss of taste. The three things that she can taste are strawberries, salt and vinegar. She is not alone. Children have experienced long COVID. A study in the British Medical Journal found that one in seven children who get COVID still have symptoms 15 weeks later, and the Office for National Statistics estimated in October 2021 that 1.2 million people in the UK had long COVID. Children like Rosie ask the Assembly and the Minister of Education this: what action are we taking to protect them? What action is being taken on air quality, air filtration and other important measures?

Society is judged on how it treats its most vulnerable, how it treats children and young people. The Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC) has said clearly today that the mitigations in place in schools are not sufficient to meet the challenge of adequately protecting children and young people or those responsible for their care. School leaders and teachers are struggling in circumstances where staff absences arising from COVID-19 make it impossible for many schools to function safely. We need to take action.

The priority must be to keep schools open safely and to keep early education and childcare open safely. We need to see a reinstatement of the childcare temporary closure fund and a reopening of other financial assistance. Schools and childcare are vital for children and to our way of life. That has been exposed in stark view during the pandemic. We must do everything that we can to maintain their safe opening.

Expedited leadership on vaccination has had significant success in limiting the impact of COVID-19. We ought to be expediting, researching, scoping, costing and delivering ventilation. Yes, personal responsibility on hands, face and space and on vaccination has a significant impact in limiting COVID-19, but there is more that we can do. Investment on clean air could be vital in limiting the impact of COVID-19.

The Northern Ireland Teachers' Council has called for guidance on CO2 monitors, investment in air filtration and more robust contact tracing. I hope that the Education Minister will take the opportunity today to reassure the Assembly, children, families and everyone in our education sector that there is a plan in place to deliver those mitigations that will also achieve safe education for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Mr Delargy: Minister, in preparation for the debate, I decided to go through some of the correspondence that I have received from my constituents since taking up my role in September. There are 263 parents, teachers and classroom assistants who have contacted me with deep concerns about the lack of preventative strategies to curb the spread of COVID. As Members, our role is to convey the opinions and concerns of our constituents. In my constituency, as in many others across the North, there is alarm, worry and despair.

Most recently, the worries have focused on the lack of ventilation. I have heard several comments today and in the lead-up to the debate that have ranged from minimising the need for ventilation right up to dispelling it. Let me refer the Minister to evidence from a teacher in one of my local schools:

"I noted today, the coldest day so far on returning to school, that the monitor read 1,018 PPM at 12.50 pm. At this time of the day, the children had left the room 20 minutes previously to go to the playground. All windows and doors were open, and I had returned to the room. So, in 20 minutes, the reading was still well over the recommended

level despite the room being ventilated and absolutely freezing. It was not a suitable environment for me, for the other assistants in the class or for the 23 children".

I have another piece of evidence that I heard from a pupil I met on Friday on a visit. She told me that she was petrified of bringing COVID home to her grandmother. Children in our schools have heightened anxiety and are in a state of worry. I was also contacted by several principals who noted that their heating costs have soared due to having to open windows and doors because of a lack of air filtration. That adds further pressure to already stretched budgets.

Minister, it would be remiss of me if I did not note that there are broader trends in that correspondence. There are trends of indecisiveness, lack of communication and lack of transparency. The failure to deliver proper ventilation compounds the pressure of the lack of substitute teachers and advice on exams and the contact-tracing queries that all remain unsolved.

I recognise that ventilation is one of a number of measures that must be taken together to reduce the risk of outbreaks in our schools. Ventilation forms an intrinsic part of the battle, particularly in primary schools and special needs environments, where children are not required to wear masks. As someone who worked in a school last year, I can tell you that this is not the best way for our children to learn. It does not present opportunities for our children to thrive. Last year, the lack of air filtration systems was due to a lack, or perceived lack, of availability. Schools remained open on the basis of the goodwill of teachers, school staff, parents and pupils and of rigorous planning by principals and school caretakers. What is frustrating and unjust is that, this year, air filtration systems are available but the Minister has made a conscious decision to deny them to our schools.

Everyone here wants our schools to remain open. We want children to have the best education available to them. Minister, the solution is simple. Ventilation is a simple but effective manner of curbing transmission of COVID in our schools. The message being sent out by you and the Department, however, is that you simply do not care. While children and teachers have sat in our classrooms —

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Delargy: — in freezing cold conditions, you have sat on your hands —

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Mr Delargy. A point of order.

Mr Stalford: For the second time, Mr Speaker, will you remind Members opposite that remarks are to be directed through the Chair?

Mr Delargy: I will start that point again.

Mr Speaker: As a general reminder to all Members: speak through the Chair, please.

Mr Delargy: I tell the Minister that the solution to lowering the transmission of COVID in our schools is simple. The message sent out by the Minister and the Department, however, is that they simply do not care. While the Minister has not made those decisions, our schools have remained open. The request has not been sprung on the Minister or the Department: Sinn Féin, along with other parties, has called for ventilation continuously for months. I have still heard no clear rationale or reason —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Delargy: — why it has not already happened.

Mrs Dodds: In preparation for the debate, and as part of an ongoing engagement in my constituency, I spoke to a wide range of schools in Upper Bann over the past week. A number of recurring themes came forward from that engagement, which I will refer to. First, we must acknowledge that schools are a bedrock of our society. They offer opportunities not just academically but to build character and for well-being. For many of our children and young people, school is a safe place — a sanctuary. School is a place where they can socialise freely without fear; a place where they receive their only hot meal of the day; and a place where they escape very difficult family circumstances.

One of the most important recurring themes of my engagement over the past days was the absolute necessity, expressed by teachers and school leaders, to keep schools open. That was magnified by one school leader who teaches in a large sixth-form college in Portadown. She indicated that many of the mental health problems, such as anxiety and feelings of loneliness, that many young people have experienced are a result of schools not being open. When I talk about schools being open, I

mean not open to transmit remote learning but open for face-to-face teaching. Some sleight of hand is being undertaken by some people on that issue. We need schools to be open, and it is important to pay tribute to the determination and leadership shown by schools and teachers in these very challenging times.

12.45 pm

Another clear issue is that of staffing in schools. If a teacher is off with COVID, that is a particular problem. The Minister has looked at the issue, and there is no quick or easy fix for it. One of the things that we are perhaps not focusing on is the fact that the success of the Engage programme means that many of those who would otherwise be on the substitute teacher list are teaching in schools full-time. There has been some suggestion that our final-year education students at Stranmillis University College, St Mary's University College and Ulster University could suddenly go into schools to take the place of those teachers. We have to be very careful about that, as we have to be fair to those young students. Much of their higher-education experience has already been disrupted by COVID. It would therefore be very challenging for them to be dropped into what is a difficult situation.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member's giving way. Does she appreciate that the idea that the Department of Education is stuffed full of qualified teachers who can simply be moved from their desk job is based on logic that would suggest that DAERA must be stuffed full of farmers or that the Department for Infrastructure must be stuffed full of bus drivers? There is absolutely no proof that there is this vast supply of teachers in the Department of Education who could be moved from their desk and into schools.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

That, of course, is right. We need to have some sense of proportion. There are tens of thousands of teachers in Northern Ireland. The numbers that would be produced by doing anything like that would be absolutely minuscule compared with the number of teachers who are out there.

Teachers are experiencing difficulties and very challenging times, but the schools that I have spoken to emphasise that they will do anything

that they can, with the help of the Department and the Minister, to ensure that they stay open.

In today's debate, there has been a lot said about the guidance that has been transmitted to schools. We should remember that the Department of Education is the Department of Education and that it is for the Department of Health and the Minister of Health, and, indeed, the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), to give guidance on health issues in schools. I note that our Chief Medical Officer recently said that schools are safe and that they need to stay open because of the societal harms that happen when they are closed.

I also heard in the debate, and, indeed, it came up —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Dodds: Oh. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for her forbearance. I call Mervyn Storey. *[Pause.]* I call Mervyn Storey.

Mr Storey: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. You caught me unawares. I thought that you were going to go to somebody else.

I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of the William Pinkerton Memorial Primary School in Dervock and of Ballymoney High School.

I take the opportunity to welcome the comments of my party colleague Diane Dodds and to condemn publicly the outrageous and horrific online abuse that has been heaped on her. I wish those investigating the abuse well so that whoever was responsible is brought to book and brought before the courts. We as a House should all stand together in condemnation.

Mr Newton: Hear, hear.

Mr Storey: No one should be surprised that we are here today, not because of the continuing spread of the omicron COVID variant or the challenges that it brings but because it seems that there are parties in the Assembly that are interested in only a quick headline or a display of political opportunism at its very worst. Members opposite have talked about care and consideration. If they cared or had consideration, they would have been working with the Minister and the Executive to ensure that, now that they are all experts, the issues were addressed and discussed.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: I will.

Mr McGrath: You talk about Members opposite. Remember that the motion is supported by Members opposite and those right the way round the Chamber to beside you. All other parties in here come from the same perspective. As has been mentioned, you should not try to make the issue tribal or make it out to be some sort of political debate. It is supported by all parties, right the way round the Chamber to beside you.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Storey: Thank you for the extra minute. Maybe I have missed something, but the fact is that some Members did not sign the recall petition. There are issues in relation to the party politics that are being played.

Despite all the rhetoric of working together and the benefits of the local Executive, all we get from parties in the House is proof, if any were needed, that a five-party coalition exists only in name or when it suits the parties to use the Executive as cover for something that they are not entirely supportive of. Maybe, today, we all need to return to the classroom and be reminded of some important lessons. In doing so, we might discover who really has been sitting on their hands.

We all, as a House — I take the point that the Member made — give our appreciation and thanks to the staff in our schools, to parents and to everybody who has been challenged at this time and over the past number of years in relation to coronavirus. The motion refers to "support for keeping schools open", as did the amendment from the SDLP, which was not accepted, and as do all the comments that we have heard to date from the Alliance Party and others in the House about the importance of keeping our schools open. That is to be welcomed. It is almost ironic that Sinn Féin now expresses support for keeping our schools open. It did not take the same approach previously; it used every means possible and every opportunity at previous stages of the pandemic to slow and disrupt the plans to reopen the schools. Maybe the party opposite, Sinn Féin, has learned to listen to the concerns of people out there on this issue, rather than always jumping on the political hobby horse.

Another element of school is the importance of language. We have heard words such as

"reckless" and "irresponsible" being used a lot over the past number of days. You would expect a party that accuses others of being reckless and irresponsible not to be engaged in the same thing. Not so for Sinn Féin. It would like us to forget that, for three years, it was reckless and irresponsible through its absenteeism from these institutions. There was no concern at its heart for parents or children; the only concern was for its political agenda. Maybe it would also like us to forget about its recklessness and irresponsibility when it totally disregarded the COVID regulations because it was more interested in the burial of one of its colleagues in a public display on the streets of Belfast. Maybe that has all been forgotten, but there was no apology, no remorse and no concern for the spread of COVID at that time.

There has been a lot of talk today about air filtration. All of a sudden, we have become experts. If we are all going to become experts, so will I. I will put into the mix a company in my constituency, Ilimex, which actually deals with sterilisation, not air filtration. There is a difference. If Members want it, I am quite happy to supply them and the Minister —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: — with a paper that was produced on that issue. It comes with a cost, and it is time that the Finance Minister came up with the money.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate, because, as we have made our way through the pandemic, schools have been among the worst-hit. As restrictions have changed — as they have either been eased or tightened — it is pupils, their parents, principals and school staff who have had to adapt at a minute's notice. We respect them for the work that they have done in very difficult circumstances. It appears that it has been successive Education Ministers who have learnt the least from that experience.

The situation in schools is now perilous. Ventilation of classrooms and school buildings is essential, as is minimising contact. I am a member of the Health Committee. We have heard from a range of experts about the transmissibility of the current variant, the need for social distancing and the need to keep ventilation at the top of the agenda. Successive witnesses at our Committee, from the Minister, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser right the way down, have told us that preventing the spread of the virus is what will save the health service and support

the tired and weary workers, who are heroes nonetheless, on its front line. However, when it comes to schools, it is practically business as usual. I find that difficult to comprehend.

Do not get me wrong: I am not suggesting that we should close schools. I am saying simply that there should be precautions, as there have been in every other sector of society, and that the delivery of those precautions requires leadership. Where is that leadership? Why have the necessary air filtration systems that schools need not been requested? Some schools are actually providing those themselves, while others are keeping their windows open to offer that ventilation. If you look out the window, you will see that we are not in California or stretches of Australia. We are in places where, when windows are open all day, children are sitting in very cold conditions and, in some instances, are having to put on coats, jumpers and extra layers just to be able to get through the day comfortably.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: I would appreciate the extra minute.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. First, does he accept that we are in a Chamber that has no ventilation? The air conditioning is off; we cannot use it. It is time that we started to practise what we preach. Secondly, does he also accept that, if we do that in education, we will have to do it for the entire public sector, and the return to work is a big challenge?

Mr McGrath: I simply ask the Member to go to any classroom —

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McGrath: — and see whether he can go up two or three storeys before he hits the roof. That is often taken into consideration whenever you are doing the various safety plans. The height of the ceiling is a big consideration. My goodness, it is a long way up to the top of the Chamber compared with most classrooms.

Then we have a Finance Minister who says that he cannot give the money until it has been asked for. That cuts deep to the dysfunctionality that we have in certain places in the Executive and that we have been subjected to for the past 15 years: silo working and a silo mentality that delivers only to silos. Surely our children, families and school staff deserve better than that?

Of course, other sectors are impacted as well. I am sure that, over the past 24 hours, many MLAs have received information from another group, childminders, about how they are being impacted in the provision of care for children, how they are suffering because of the massive amount of sickness in that sector, and how they feel that they have not been given adequate support either. I will also mention, just because I always do, the Youth Service that is out there. The Youth Service is delivering. However, it also has to bring lots of young people from different backgrounds into the same space, and it should also be considered for any help or assistance that is available.

Just before Christmas, I had pupils from the Holy Cross Primary School in Attical, in my constituency, here in Stormont. They were eager to raise issues, ask questions and know what we were doing about matters in their local area. It was a pleasure to meet them.

How do we tell those children that the reason that their education is in peril at the moment is that some political parties will not grow up and get their act together and work in partnership to resolve the issues and solve the problems that they face? Do we have to tell those children that certain parties are willing to prioritise political gains rather than health and safety in the classroom? Those children and young people deserve better than the perilous position that they are being left in. We need joined-up action from the Education and Finance Ministers and a long-term strategy for our schools. If that is not forthcoming, those parties will have lost whatever shred of credibility they might have once had. Let us do the right thing. Let us stop embarrassing ourselves. Let us grow up and have our schools fixed up, safe and delivering for our children.

1.00 pm

Mr Allister: The first thing that strikes me about the motion — it leads through to its predominant purpose — is the appalling absence from it of any acknowledgement or recognition of the hugely dedicated work of those who keep our schools going. As the chairman of a board of governors, I know just what the last year has been like, not just for teaching staff but for all staff. Yet, here we come to debate this issue and there is not a word of recognition in the motion of the sacrifices and efforts that have been made.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I have sat through the entirety of the debate. Has he also noticed that one thing that

has been absent from the contributions of all those who have argued in favour of the motion is any notion of how much this will cost the Department should it become policy?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Allister: Yes, and I will come to that.

It is clear to me that the recall for the motion is and was a stunt — nothing more than that. We had a similar situation in September; it did not make any difference, and nor will this. Of course, the primary message of the motion, which was signed by three parties of the Executive, causes me to remind the House that those three parties are in the Executive. This is the Executive, of which they are part, that they are now tearing apart when it comes to one of those Departments. What we are seeing, of course, is the dying months of the disintegration of the Executive, and the dysfunction that is writ large over the very bringing of the motion brings that point home.

I also have to say that some of the people who brought today's motion are the very people who could not get our schools closed quickly enough and campaigned, lobbied and agitated to close the schools and to cancel exams. Now, we are supposed to believe that the motivation here is pure and that it is about the interests of our children. Well, you cannot have it both ways, just as Mr Sheehan could not have it both ways the other morning on 'Good Morning Ulster'. He boldly asserted that the Finance Minister was ready to pay whatever it took to provide the filtration systems, but, within 60 seconds, he had a volte-face and said, "No, no, I cannot say that".

Of course, that brings us to the heart of the issue: what is the cost? What is the efficacy of the systems? Are there alternatives? Where does it fit in the context of how many schoolchildren are, in fact, being hospitalised with COVID? I notice, for example, that our ICU levels are static, essentially, despite the rise in transmission.

It is common case that the symptoms within the school-age limit are, thankfully, relatively modest, but what is the cost? Who will pay for it? How will it be paid? We have a Finance Minister who has told the Education Department that, for the next three years, it is a 2% cut. Then that Minister's party says, "Go find the money to pay for these things". As someone pointed out earlier, once you establish that precedent in school workplaces, will the

same demand logically be made for every workplace? What will that cost? Once more, we are in a free slide of easily made demands without any appreciation or consideration of who pays for it, what it will cost and what you will have to go without in order to supply this. Those who bring a motion such as this need to do better. They need to come with a reasoned, costed argument, if we are to do this, as to how we will pay for it and what the knock-on consequences are rather than simply saying, "This is what we want. Somebody else go and do it". That is not really the way to conduct responsible politics, but, sadly, in this disintegrating Executive, that is how things seem to work or not work.

Mr Carroll: To say that the Minister has managed COVID in schools abysmally is putting it mildly. Week after week, we hear about rising cases of COVID in schools, and teachers and workers are isolating as COVID spreads throughout our schools. Pupils have had to withdraw from school and isolate and have lost out on important education and socialising with their peers. The Minister's approach, basically, amounts to continuing as normal — nothing to see here — even though we are in a pandemic and are being told that Governments will do unprecedented things.

Graham Gault of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) has also raised a concern about the implementation of contact tracing and staff being in crisis. Schools that were already under pressure because they did not have enough staff before COVID are now feeling that pressure even more as staff develop symptoms and self-isolate. He, alongside many others, has warned about the lack of contingency plans being put in place by the Minister. It is not as if the Minister could not see this coming. In August 2021, the trade union side of the Joint Negotiating Council for the Education Authority told the Minister:

"Unless urgent action is taken more children will become sick, or need to isolate, and lose out on face-to-face teaching".

It continued:

"all possible practical steps should be taken now to avoid the chaos of this year being repeated."

Those steps were not taken.

The Minister may say that this is a challenging period, and, no doubt, it is for those on the front line trying to teach and educate while

navigating the virus. It is approaching two years since the virus has been on our shores; the Minister, or any Minister, cannot use the excuse of novelty any longer. The truth is that the solutions have been known for some time but they have not been implemented by the Minister or the Executive. One of the main ways to reduce transmission of the virus and protect people's health and in-person teaching is to ensure that there is proper ventilation in school settings. The Minister has failed to do that on a number of fronts. There is no current law to set out a minimum standard for clean air in schools. People are being failed and placed in danger.

As we have heard, CO2 monitors are not being installed in every school across the North. The Minister has failed again. Despite a record number of cases in schools and in the community, the Minister did not push for a circuit breaker to be implemented in schools before Christmas. There has been no monitoring of long COVID among the thousands of education workers who have been affected by that. The effect has been to let the virus rip at all costs, regardless of the long-term health impact on education workers.

As if that were not bad enough, the Minister has returned £40 million of unspent money to the Finance Minister, which could have protected pupils and staff in schools: cataclysmic failure once again. Picture that: cases are shooting through the roof, worry and anxiety are at record levels and, rather than using the money to ensure that schools are as safe as is practicable and possible, the Minister has returned money unspent. It is a bit like your house being on fire and chasing away the fire brigade from your door, saying, "We don't need you".

It is not good enough that the only options for children are for COVID to rip through classrooms, be stuck in freezing classrooms or have no in-person education at all. In the South, my party has introduced the Workplace Ventilation (Covid-19) Bill, which gives all workers the right to clean air, and the onus is on employers to supply that. If our party can do that, why can the DUP and the Minister not do it?

There are rules and actions in place for breaching food safety rules, so why not for workplaces that breach rules on safe, clean air and put people at risk?

There has been talk about a pan-nationalist front today. For me, the DUP is deploying the same old tactic: when it is tanking in the polls or its Minister is, rightly, under criticism, it blames

the bogey Fenian, the pan-nationalist front or whatever. It is sectarian deflection, and it needs to be called out. I am not part of any imaginary front, but I am happy to support the motion today.

Mr Speaker: In accordance with Standing Order 17(4), the Business Committee and I have agreed to allow some flexibility to go beyond the normal time limit for timed debates. A number of Members still wish to speak, and I want to accommodate them this afternoon. They would not be accommodated within the original time limit, so we will grant a grace period of 15 minutes. All remaining Members will have two minutes to speak, and no additional time will be allocated for interventions. That is unfortunate, but it is to guarantee that everyone who wants to speak will be able to do so.

Mr Stalford: I will be brief. As I said earlier, not one person who has spoken in favour of the motion has indicated to us what the budgetary allocation would be. It is the height of irresponsibility —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: No.

It is the height of irresponsibility to pass motions and then say, "It is the Minister's responsibility to find out how much our flights of fancy are going to cost the Department", yet that is precisely what is being expected and what they are playing at today. Over the last few days, we have witnessed nothing more than rank showboating and political posturing from the SDLP and Sinn Féin. It is particularly ironic that, in the context of a Sinn Féin Finance Minister having imposed cuts on the Department of Education, demands are being made of that Department to find additional funds. It is just outrageous.

HEPA ventilation systems have been held up to the public as some sort of panacea for the outrageous problem and situation of children being in cold classrooms. The people who tabled the motion know, however — at least, they should have known before they authored it — that classroom windows would have to remain open to allow a HEPA filtration system to work. Going to the media and on radio to try to sell to people nonsense, as has been attempted over the last few days, about HEPA filters is simply irresponsible.

I finish by thanking teachers, groundskeepers, cleaners and the lollipop ladies and men who

keep our schools open. I welcome the new-found commitment from the parties opposite, who could not get schools closed quickly enough, to keeping schools open. I hope that failure to implement these measures is not, on their part, a precursor to demanding the closure of our schools at some point in the future.

Mr Nesbitt: I declare an interest as chair of the board of governors at Movilla High School in Newtownards. The issue at Movilla today is not ventilation but heating. If any Member knows anything about central heating boilers, there is a free school dinner in it for them.

Like you, Mr Speaker, I am conscious that members of the public may be tuned into the debate. We should not feed the narrative that we are all wasters and that devolution is useless. That is not to say that we should not scrutinise the Department. There are valid questions: is there a plan, is it appropriate, and is it being delivered in a timely manner? I look forward to the Minister's remarks.

If the proverbial man or woman from Mars had just arrived and was watching the debate, would he or she twig that the DUP and Sinn Féin are partners? This year, 2022, is the fifteenth year in a row that they have been given the role of leading from the Executive table in Stormont Castle. It is timely to remember that our system of government is consociational: in other words and to put it crudely, once the election is over and the votes have been counted, all parties that take their place at that table cease to be rivals and should become partners, partners in delivery for our schools, businesses and hospitals and for our people.

I have not seen a great deal of that today. I look forward to the Minister's comments.

1.15 pm

Ms Armstrong: I declare an interest as a member of the boards of governors of Strangford College and of Portaferry Integrated Primary School. I will not use too much of my time talking around the issues. Like the Member who just spoke, I want to see solutions, so I simply ask that the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland and NASUWT are listened to when they say that school leaders and teachers are struggling due to staff shortages. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on that.

Ventilation is one of the key tools needed if we are to keep schools open, and I fully support

that we do, but the solution presented by some is mechanical ventilation. Over recess, we heard from the Department of Finance that no bid for such ventilation had been submitted. I ask the Minister to clarify whether that is true.

I also ask that we think about uniforms. It is not good enough to say that each school should be putting down their own uniform policy. I ask the Minister to consider making an announcement — I look forward to hearing it — to allow children who are shivering in classrooms to be permitted to wear whatever they need to in order to keep warm.

Keeping schools open is important for our students, not just for their physical learning but for their mental health. Students are worried about a return to remote learning — in fact, we heard today that some have returned to remote learning — and we have heard students on the radio today saying that they are concerned about their safety in schools. I am concerned for those pupils, and I ask that clarification is provided for pupils and their teachers about what is going to happen with exams.

Today, school leaders have been told that the Engage II programme may be used flexibly. Is that robbing Peter to pay Paul? Engage II is supposed to provide support for students who need extra help. If those staff are redeployed, what happens to the children who were availing themselves of that support? Are they to be left behind? What does that say about what we think about children with special educational needs? If teachers, unions, students and parents are saying that they need a plan, then it is time for a transparent plan — with clarification — to be provided. I support the call for a plan and want the safety of our pupils and staff —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Armstrong: — to be put first. I support the motion.

Mr Weir: As political stunts go, this is very much a case of plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. Throughout the pandemic, planning has gone on in the Department of Education, whether it was during my time as Minister or since the current Minister came into post. That has been done in step with the advice given by the Public Health Agency and the Health Department. At times, that has meant that we have been frustrated in trying to get to where we want to be in education, and sometimes it has taken us in a direction that, ideally, from a purely educational point of view,

we did not want to go. Also, there have been situations in which changes have had to be made. However, every step along the way has been taken in step with what the Department of Health has advised.

For instance, guidance did not change over the Christmas period because the health guidance did not change. It seems that there are some in the House who see themselves as amateur virologists and seem to be suggesting that they know better than the Department of Health or the Chief Medical Officer. Would they prefer that the Minister went on a solo run regarding the advice that is being given?

I mentioned keeping in step with what the Health Department has asked for. I wish that some of the parties here had done likewise. Mention was made of the rush to close schools at the start of the pandemic. At that time, two of the parties in the Chamber voted to close schools when that was opposed by the Chief Medical Officer and the Department of Health.

Mr Weir: My second point is on the filtration systems. Even the professor who is in charge of doing the tests on those systems has said that there is no guarantee that in the real world they will deliver what they are supposed to deliver and that their use needs to be evidence-based. SAGE has indicated that such systems are of very limited benefit and are not a substitute for ventilation; the windows would have to be open throughout. It seems that some Members regard themselves as being more sage than SAGE itself.

Mr McNulty: Bliain úr faoi mhaise duit. Happy new year to everyone here and everyone out there. I thank teachers, school staff, principals and all support staff for their enormous efforts and for continuing to keep going, despite the pressure and duress they have been under and the significant risk to their health and that of their families.

Minister, 35,000 people have signed our petition, which raises concern about the safety of schools in relation to contact tracing. The bringer of that petition, Suzanne Kelly, deserves a response out of simple courtesy. I have questions. How many schools have received air filtration systems, and are those systems impacting on the transmissibility of the virus? What are the costs of implementing those filtration systems and of not implementing them? What is the downstream cost to our health service in terms of the waiting lists, our GP services and the pressures on our emergency departments? What is the

downstream impact of not putting filtration systems into classrooms?

I pay enormous tribute to our special teachers in special schools, especially given the heightened risks that are involved there, because there is contact, and close contact cannot be avoided in many of those environments. It has been incredible that those teachers and staff have kept those schools open for the parents and the children: keep going.

Where are we on exams? Are the mitigations that are being put in place fair for every child? Are the mitigations fair for children with special needs, those who are statemented or those who have any sort of learning difficulty? Do they help and support children who are from socially deprived backgrounds? Will the exam processes be fair? There is no algorithm for the fairness that we need, Minister.

Minister, what are your plans for sport and physical education? The whole system is connected. Our physical health is connected to our mental health, our —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McNulty: — emotional health and our spiritual health. Minister, what are your plans for PE and physical activity for children in our schools?

Mr Dickson: I listened with interest to the debate, particularly the concerns about how it is very important that we keep our children and young people in schools and that we do that safely. That is what I want to hear from the Minister today. How have her plans evolved to keep young people in school and to keep them and all the staff who are working with them safe?

We are told that ventilation is vital in that respect. Therefore, it is unacceptable that classroom windows are wide open in the middle of winter and that young people and teachers have to put additional clothes on. I have a family member who is a teacher, and she has to wear a coat in her classroom. That is the choice that you have to make to stay warm and to do your job during the day.

We heard a lot of scientific experts around the Chamber refer to filtration of the air. The whole purpose of opening a window is to exchange the air in the room. There are other methods of doing that. Quite simply, installing old-fashioned Vent-Axia-type electric fans in windows is a

very cheap and low-tech solution to dealing with the problem where it is not practical to have the windows open or it is extremely cold in the classroom. We are told repeatedly on television advertisements and by scientific officers that it is about exchanging and not necessarily filtering the air in the room. It is about getting a change of air in the room. That can be achieved by other mechanical means. Quite often, the low-tech solution is the best solution.

I want to hear from the Minister today about the planning that has been done over a long period in order to assess every classroom in Northern Ireland. Can we see the spreadsheet that sets out information about classrooms where the windows can be opened and an acceptable temperature achieved; classrooms where the windows cannot be opened; and classrooms where the windows can be opened but an acceptable temperature cannot be achieved? Let us have a look at the data to see what the Minister and her officials have done to achieve that in order to provide for the education of all our young people across Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I thank all those Members who have contributed so far. I call the Minister of Education, Michelle McIlveen. The Minister has 15 minutes to respond.

Miss McIlveen (The Minister of Education): Thank you Mr Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate on today's motion. At the outset of my contribution, I will address parents across Northern Ireland: I want you to know that I treat my responsibility for your children with the utmost gravity. Their safety and well-being is the top priority for me and my Department. It informs every decision that I make.

Regrettably, today's motion represents quick fixes, easy headlines and the worst form of politics. In the midst of the most severe pandemic in living memory, we must not play politics with our children's education. My strategy and that of the Executive is and has always been clear. I have had a comprehensive plan in place since the autumn to address the challenges that are presented by the omicron variant; to suggest otherwise is just wrong.

My Department and I are guided at all times by the advice of the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency. Before the beginning of term, we put in place our COVID guidance framework, which was developed in close conjunction with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and school practitioners. It is a framework for living with COVID: to reduce risk whilst enabling schools to function

as fully as possible in order to provide high-quality education to our children and young people. It is also a framework that empowers school leaders to make the right decisions for their school community and their own unique context. They are best placed to identify how their school can operate effectively, supported and advised by the EA, CCMS and COVID-19 link officers.

Our measures to reduce transmission in schools mirror those across wider society. They include good hand hygiene; good natural ventilation; a twice-weekly asymptomatic testing programme; use of face coverings in post-primary schools; consistent groups where possible; vaccination for all staff, and pupils aged 12 and over; provision of CO2 monitors; and reducing contacts. No single measure is the magic bullet but this range of mitigations works collectively to reduce risk as much as possible.

Unlike other jurisdictions, throughout the autumn term, we kept in place mitigations such as face coverings, one-way systems and consistent groups. As we have throughout the pandemic, we will respond immediately to any changes in public health advice. I reiterate to the Assembly that the Department of Health has made no recommendations to the Executive to introduce further mitigations or restrictions in education settings. Indeed, at the Health Committee last week, the Chief Medical Officer advised:

"It is really important that there is a doubling down on the baseline mitigations that Northern Ireland's schools, DE and the EA have maintained throughout the pandemic ... There is no magic one thing that can be put in place in schools other than a continued focus on all those things that work."

I turn to the issue of ventilation and air filtration devices referenced in the motion. All the scientific and public health advice stresses natural ventilation. Nothing is more effective than opening windows and doors. My Department's COVID guidance provides schools with detailed advice on managing ventilation. The motion portrays air filters as the magic solution to ending COVID transmission in schools. That is over-simplistic and in no way reflects the complexity of the issue. At a conservative estimate, it would cost around £40 million to install them across 20,000 classrooms. If the evidence supports such investment, I will have no hesitation in bidding to the Executive and the Minister of Finance for such funds. However, I will not move ahead of

the evidence and spend public money recklessly. We must follow the science. The UK Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) has concluded:

"There is currently very little evidence that air cleaners are an effective control to prevent COVID-19, however the principles of air cleaning suggests that they may be useful in some cases."

I must stress at this point that the scientific evidence regarding the effectiveness of air cleaners is inconclusive. SAGE has also recommended:

"Air cleaners should never be used as a substitute for ventilation."

This is a highly technical area. I have, therefore, written to the Health Minister to ask for the Chief Scientific Adviser's views on the merits of air cleaners, in particular HEPA filters, to prevent COVID-19. The University of Leeds is leading a Government-funded trial of the use of air cleaning technologies in school settings. My Department will consider its findings, along with any advice from the Chief Scientific Adviser and SAGE, in taking evidence-based decisions on the wider installation of air filtration units in classrooms.

I recognise that ventilation is an issue of concern to schools. Much of our schools estate requires urgent capital investment. As an interim measure, I am investing over £2 million this year on ventilation works. That includes £1 million to replace old and defective windows, and £1 million for CO2 monitors. To date, 11,500 monitors have been deployed alongside detailed guidance on their use, and a further 5,000 are due for delivery. We have ordered an initial 100 air filtration units, which can be deployed quickly to where they are needed. If a room is identified as having a low level of ventilation, schools should contact the EA maintenance help desk, and a maintenance officer will attend the school within 24 hours. Since CO2 monitors were delivered to schools before Christmas, the EA maintenance help desk has received 19 calls from schools seeking assistance on ventilation. The EA has attended 16 schools to assess the situation and arrange for any remedial works to be undertaken, including, where appropriate, use of an air cleaning unit.

1.30 pm

I now turn to school staffing. I share the concerns voiced by a number of Members

about the staffing pressures that schools are experiencing and about the likelihood that those pressures will intensify. I fully recognise the disruption that they cause many schools and families. Some schools have had to move some pupils to remote learning for a short period. We must recognise that it is a difficult issue and one that many businesses and employers across Northern Ireland also face. We have to be realistic and recognise that there is no ready and easy solution to staffing shortages in schools. There is no magic tap of teachers and other staff to turn on, so, as part of my strategic approach to addressing the omicron impact, my officials have worked with the EA and the CCMS to put in place contingency actions. Before Christmas, I wrote to recently retired teachers and appealed to them to consider returning to teaching in the short term. Over 100 retired teachers have responded to date by registering on the Northern Ireland substitute teacher register. Part-time teaching and non-teaching staff have also been making themselves available for additional days and hours in order to address the staffing pressures in schools. I wrote to schools this morning to notify them that substitute teachers who are currently being used to deliver the Engage II programme can be allowed to cover staff absences in their school in order to maintain face-to-face teaching, if other options to get substitute cover have been exhausted.

My Department is also exploring whether qualified teachers who work in the wider education sector could provide additional teaching capacity. Education sectoral bodies have been asked to identify qualified teaching staff in their organisation who could be deployed in the short term to support schools that have acute staffing pressures, and I expect that information to be provided in the coming days. We again have to focus on the realities of the situation, however. Qualified teaching staff working in those organisations do important work in meeting statutory responsibilities and supporting schools and individual pupils, including pupils with special educational needs. We therefore need to balance the benefits of redeployment to schools against any detrimental impact on the support provided to vulnerable pupils and schools. I do not know where claims of desk jobs have come from. Teachers in the EA, the CCMS and other support organisations are the COVID-19 link officers providing vital front-line support to our school leaders.

My Department has also explored with the higher education institutions and the student representative bodies whether final-year student teachers could be deployed as

substitute teachers and classroom assistants. The majority of student teachers are already scheduled to undertake school placements between now and early April. In normal circumstances, students must be supervised by a qualified teacher throughout their placement. Nonetheless, in recognition of the pressures that schools now face, it is proposed that, if students are willing and if school principals assess it to be appropriate, final-year students might operate for extended periods in any day without direct supervision. That approach will potentially see up to 550 existing teachers released from supervisory roles and able to be redeployed in their school. There are issues, including insurance indemnity, to be addressed before that new arrangement can be implemented, and I hope to be able to confirm that enhanced flexibility within the next few days.

My Department is monitoring the staffing situation in schools closely. We have put in place a daily staffing survey and a weekly survey on remote learning to provide the necessary information. At the beginning of the pandemic, my Department launched a volunteering scheme to support our schools in providing educational supervision for vulnerable children and children of key workers. The scheme was very successful, with over 1,000 volunteers coming forward. The volunteering scheme is a further contingency to be deployed if necessary, and my officials are currently refreshing the database.

I will now speak directly to our school leaders and teachers and pay tribute to their leadership and professionalism in these testing times. Never before has our education system witnessed such disruption, with two periods of extended school closure, the cancellation of public exams and the need to develop new ways of teaching our young people remotely. Your work and that of your school staff have been outstanding. However, I know that you are weary. You have been at the front line, supporting our children and young people throughout the pandemic for nearly two years. I am committed to reducing the burden on school leaders and teachers. Given the intense staffing pressures and the additional workload associated with performance review and staff development for teacher appraisal, I am pleased to announce that the process will be paused for the current academic year. Inspection also continues to be paused, and I have asked my officials to suspend all arrangements for Key Stage assessment and to relax reporting arrangements to parents. The Education and Training Inspectorate has also postponed all monitoring visits that were

scheduled to take place during January. I hope that that will help you to focus on your core business of teaching and learning during this difficult time.

I also reassure you that contingencies are in place for these difficult circumstances. In December, my Department issued updated guidance to schools on remote learning, outlining the circumstances where schools are able to use remote learning and providing clear, step-by-step guidelines on key considerations for school leaders when making that decision. That was enhanced last week through the provision of a range of resource materials on remote learning to further support schools taking that step. For Members' information, 75% of schools that responded to the remote learning survey did not have to use remote learning at all last week and provided full timetables.

With regard to examinations, my Department has worked closely with CCEA to make adaptations to GCSE, AS and A-level qualifications to take account of the disruption experienced by students. CCEA, in line with the other UK exams bodies, will ensure that grading in 2022 takes account of the disruption experienced by learners and that they are not disadvantaged due to the pandemic. My Department has also agreed with CCEA contingency measures to facilitate the awarding of qualifications to those who may miss exams due to illness or self-isolation. Should the public health situation change and public examinations have to be cancelled, I have agreed contingencies for alternative awarding arrangements. They can be stood up by CCEA at pace. Detailed contingencies are in place. They largely reflect the 2021 arrangements, which worked smoothly. It is simply utter nonsense to suggest that contingency plans for alternative awarding are not in place, and I want to reassure pupils and parents on that point. All our young people will be enabled to complete their qualifications and progress to the next phase of education, employment or training.

A couple of issues were raised throughout the debate with regard to contact tracing. That is still being led by the Department of Health and the PHA. However, the need for PCR tests following a negative lateral flow test (LFT) has changed, and that may require revised messaging by the Department of Health in relation to contact tracing not only for schools but for broader society. I have asked the Health Minister to meet me to discuss track and trace.

Mr McCrossan raised the issue of other staff members. He may be aware that we have an

emergency register for classroom assistants and for cleaning relief responders. The EA has engaged the Premier People recruitment agency to look for catering supervisors and cooks, and that is also progressing.

With regard to the childcare temporary closure fund, we are at an advanced stage with our economists in finalising a business case to go to DOF. As soon as I receive approval of that business case, I will announce an extension. Furthermore, with regard to the sustainability fund, we are working with the sector. I have made a bid, and it will reflect the potential need.

The reality is that there are no easy solutions to the COVID pandemic, which is endemic, at present, in our society. Some parties have presented over-simplistic solutions to complex problems. Instead of grabbing quick headlines, we need to work together across the political divide to support our children to remain safely in school. Our children's futures depend on it.

Mr Speaker: Nicola Brogan has 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech on the debate.

Ms Brogan: I thank my colleague, the Deputy Chairperson of the Education Committee, Pat Sheehan, for initiating the emergency sitting of the Assembly and all the Members who supported his petition. We are here to discuss a really important topic, and I am glad that we have had the opportunity to do that. I also thank all the Members for their contributions and the Minister for attending and making her remarks. I join all other Members in thanking our school leaders, principals and all school staff for their hard work in ensuring that schools have been able to reopen after Christmas and that face-to-face learning continues, despite the huge challenges.

Right across the House, we are in agreement on the need to ensure that schools are kept open so that pupils receive face-to-face learning, but we must ensure that schools are safe for pupils, teachers, classroom assistants and other school staff. The disagreement today seems to be about who is responsible for supporting schools to ensure that they can remain open safely. Of course, that responsibility is with the Education Minister.

On the financing of air filtration devices, which was discussed, the process is clear: the Department of Education costs the equipment that the schools need; it then submits a bid for funding to the Department of Finance; the Finance Minister brings a recommendation on the funding for the bid to the Executive; and the

Executive make the final decision on how much funding should be allocated.

I acknowledge that the Education Minister faces a difficult task, but doing nothing and not having the right plans in place does not address the reality. For months, school leaders and teachers and their union representatives have been crying out for the correct support and guidance from our Education Minister. In the lead-up to Christmas recess, the Education Committee heard from those on the front line. Every one of them wanted to keep schools open. Everyone said that they placed a high value on children's learning and recognised the importance of children learning together in a school environment. Everyone recognised the significant safeguarding role played by schools and the negative impact that school closures had on the mental health and well-being of pupils, which Mrs Dodds highlighted in her remarks this afternoon.

The school leaders on the front line had serious concerns that required urgent addressing. They included the unrealistic workload faced by principals; teaching staff absences due to the virus, which we have discussed widely this afternoon; and difficulties recruiting the temporary staff that we need to ensure that schools remain open safely. Their concerns also included outstanding maintenance issues that are undermining basic ventilation measures, such as being able to open windows, the failure to distribute CO2 monitors and the lack of ventilation units. However, their main concern was the apparent lack of planning: there was no blueprint or plan A or B.

As a Committee, we raised many of those issues with the Minister directly. As MLAs, we wrote to the Department, and today we have recalled the Assembly. Minister, we want to make sure that you are listening. We need to be certain that you are seeking solutions and formulating an action plan so that schools can remain open safely. Schools and school leaders face unprecedented challenges, and it would be really unfair if were to leave them to face those challenges alone.

As my party's spokesperson for children and young people, I alert you, Minister, to the grave difficulties currently facing childcare and the early years sector. I am glad to hear that you have put in a bid to extend the childcare temporary closure fund and the childcare sustainability fund. I have raised those issues with you a number of times, because the sector really is struggling. It is accepted that that sector is often overlooked, especially in education. We need to keep the focus on early

education as well. I am glad that you are looking into that. We would really like confirmation that both funds will be extended.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Ms Brogan: Yes. Go ahead, Justin.

Mr McNulty: Will the Member join me in saying to all our children and young people who have faced terrible hardship throughout the pandemic, "You are our future. You are strong. You have enormous wells of resilience. If you are struggling, reach out and ask for help. It is OK not to be OK. You can overcome all obstacles. Stay strong"?

Mr Speaker: Will the Member make her remarks through the Chair, please?

Ms Brogan: I will. Sorry about that.

Thank you to the Member for his intervention. I absolutely agree. It has been a very difficult 18 months to two years for our children and young people, but they have shown real resilience. It absolutely is OK not to be OK and to reach out and ask for help. We all support that and encourage children to reach out if they are suffering or have any kind of concern.

To conclude, I thank everyone for their contributions today. I will, of course, support the motion, and I urge all Members to do so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its support for keeping schools open and operating in a manner that is safe for pupils, parents, teachers and staff; further expresses serious concern at the lack of planning by the Minister of Education to ensure the safe reopening of schools in the context of the increased transmissibility of the omicron COVID-19 variant; recognises the staffing pressures that increased transmissibility will present for schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to urgently develop a plan that puts the safety of pupils and staff first, through the installation of air monitoring and air filtration devices in all classrooms, and addresses the staffing pressures facing the education system by utilising and deploying additional teaching capacity to keep schools open and safe.

Mr Speaker: I thank all Members for their contributions this afternoon. Again, I wish a

happy and constructive new year to all
Members.

Adjourned at 1.45 pm.

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