



# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 31 December 2020

*The Assembly met at 11.00 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Private Members' Business

### COVID-19: Impact on School Opening

**Mr Speaker:** Members, having been given notice by not less than 30 Members, I have summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of debating a motion on the impact of COVID-19 on school opening.

**Mr McCrossan:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes with concern reports that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) may have recommended school closures; is deeply concerned by the number of deaths from COVID-19; recognises the concerns of teachers, pupils and parents; calls for urgent clarity from the Minister of Education on what work has been undertaken with the Department of Health on protecting schoolchildren, teachers, parents and the wider public from the spread of COVID-19; and further calls on the Minister of Education to outline the medical and scientific advice his Department has received and to explain whether he will consider additional mitigations, including a phased return or extended school closure, if this has been recommended by the medical and scientific advice.*

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The Member will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and printed on the Marshalled List. As the amendment has been tabled by the proposers of the motion, I ask Mr McCrossan to move the amendment and to address both the motion and the amendment when opening the debate.

**Mr McCrossan:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after "mitigations" and insert:*

*"and protections, while welcoming the announcement today by the Minister detailing a phased return to schools and seeking assurances from the Minister on the work his Department will now undertake to ensure the safety of staff and pupils during the remainder of the pandemic."*

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you to the Members of the House who joined the SDLP in signing a recall petition that forced today's meeting of the Assembly. I recognise that it is New Year's Eve, and there are many other places that many of us would rather be than in the Chamber debating an issue that we have warned about for many, many weeks, if not months.

This is not a new pandemic. We are nearly a year into this public health crisis situation and yet, our Minister of Education is spiralling dangerously in one position without taking heed of the warnings from school leaders, the unions, politicians, parents and children and the public. He has continued — until 7:30 am this morning when a statement was released — to persevere with 4 January as the opening date for schools. That was always a dangerous position and one that many people had profound concerns about.

The situation with coronavirus has got very, very serious. Our communities are rife with infection. Every part of our community is concerned about how dangerously the situation is spiralling out of control. How this Minister felt, at any stage, that it was appropriate for schools to return on 4 January, given that we knew that infection rates would spiral out of control over Christmas, and how he suggested and stood over 4 January, is the reason that we are in this situation today. Our hands were tied and we were forced to this position.

At the outset, I want to say that we are in this position because of a Minister who continues to ignore everybody. We do not know who is advising this Minister, nor do we know what scientific or medical advice this Minister is

following. I am pretty certain that all along, we have been told that the incubation period for the virus is up to two weeks, yet this Minister wanted to return at least 30 children into a classroom in front of a teacher, which puts people at huge risk.

**Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McCrossan:** You will have your chance in a moment, Minister. I am making my point, thank you.

This Minister has forced us into a position where the Assembly has been recalled on New Year's Eve. That is why we are in this situation. Teachers, principals, school staff, parents and members of the community have all spoken out in outrage and with considerable anxiety, but yet it has taken, once again, a recall petition for this Minister to change his mind. It has taken Gavin Williamson to determine the English position for this Minister to determine the Northern Irish position. It is a totally reckless situation and it shows a Minister who is not in control of his own Department or brief. It shows a Minister who is more willing to follow a Conservative Government instead of putting the interests of our community first.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for giving way, although the prospect of any decision being taken on the basis of what he is saying rather than the scientific advice that I have got beggars belief.

I want to talk about the return to schools on 4 January. In the last 24 hours, there has also been a shift down South. Given the fact that, until yesterday, the Republic of Ireland took the same position on a return date, I wonder did the Member give the same advice with the same admonishment to his effective party colleagues in Fianna Fáil who, presumably, are in the same position.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Minister for the intervention. This is not a day to be playing with a table tennis ball. Lives are at risk — *[Interruption.]* Lives are at risk, Minister. Let me make a point; you cannot dare to compare with the leadership that has been shown by Minister Nora Foley in the south of this island. From the outset, she —

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

**Mr McCrossan:** No, I will not, Minister.

**Mr Weir:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If the Member is referring to the Minister down South, it may be helpful if he got her name right. It is Norma rather than Nora.

**Mr McCrossan:** Minister, if you want to play about with us, people are watching today and they are very concerned about their children and their teachers. If you paid more attention to what they are saying instead of throwing balls across the room then maybe we would get somewhere.

The situation is very, very dangerous and serious and this Minister cannot compare with the South. Why? Because the Minister down there has shown great, profound leadership. She has put mitigations, protections and resources in place to protect children, teachers and classroom assistants and, in turn, their parents and families as well. However, this Minister is willing to die in the ditch for the transfer test — a glorious DUP agenda for which they were willing to sacrifice our grannies and grandas over the Christmas period when COVID has been rife.

Yet, we look to the South for leadership. Do you know why? Because that Minister stepped up and listened to the school leaders in her community. That Minister used extra public buildings to ensure that social distancing could be enforced.

That Minister also made face masks mandatory. That Minister employed more teachers, That Minister made sure that the classroom environment was safe. This Minister has done absolutely nothing. If he wants to go round the houses, Scotland has put in place measures to protect teachers, staff and children. Wales has done the same. Even the Minister in England, Gavin Williamson, whom our Minister looks up to so proudly, has put in place mitigations and protections.

We are in this situation simply because the Minister has failed to act. The Minister has ignored warnings for months and does not seem to believe that the virus can be carried home by children to their families. He does not believe that teachers are terrified. We are now in a situation where we must decide between the protection of children's education and their lives. That is a deplorable situation that we have been forced into by a Minister's inaction in the Assembly. I do not think it is enough.

To be clear, we do not want schools to close. No Member could safely say that they want that, but we want schools to reopen safely with the mitigations, protections and resources in

place that the Minister has failed to provide. I heard the Minister commenting over the last few days about special educational needs (SEN) and vulnerable children. I share his concerns, and I am glad that he shares the concerns of the many people who have expressed them to him, particularly in the Education Committee. I also share the position that special educational needs settings need to remain open. However, the Minister needs to put in place protections for the teachers, classroom assistants and others who will be in those rooms and will be directly exposed to the virus.

The situation is grave. We are back in the Chamber today because the Minister waited until 7.30 this morning to release a statement that practically repeated what the English Minister, Gavin Williamson, put out yesterday. Why cannot the Minister stand on his own two feet and listen to the teachers, principals and young people in our society and recognise that COVID is spiralling out of control? Even over the last week there have been hundreds of people under the age of 20 who have tested positive for the new variant of the virus. It is spreading throughout our community without control. Despite the record high rates of infection in communities across Northern Ireland and multiple schools and unions raising considerable concern, the Minister has failed to act.

In the Minister's statement of 21 December to the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response, he acknowledged that:

*"options need to be developed that protect the education and safety of our children while combating the virus."*

That sounded lovely, but there was nothing behind it. There has been no communication with schools, teachers or principals whatsoever, and they have been left again to the last minute by this last-minute Minister, who flips around at the last minute leaving teachers two days, in some instances, due to his statement this morning, to prepare to open parts of their schools for nursery places or special educational needs children. Two days? It is totally outrageous, and it is a failure of the Minister to put the interests of our children first.

The House is largely united. I would even argue that people in the Minister's party disagree with his position and his dithering on these important issues. I repeat, for the public, that this is not about closing schools, but anyone who thinks that schools will be safe to open on 4 January, which the Minister planned to do until 7.30 this

morning, is mistaken. It is a serious failure on his part, and it would be a serious failure by us all were we not to hold him to account for it.

I also touch on resourcing. If the Minister were serious about protecting children's education, he would have acted sooner, but he has continued blindly to ignore the concerns of teachers and young people.

The Minister needs to get serious. Public confidence is at an all-time low, and, if he does not step up very soon, I will find myself on the same side.

**Mr Newton:** We all recognise the very serious health situation that is out there. In recognising that serious health situation, I want to pay tribute to the principals, teachers, support staff and, indeed, the boards of governors in all of the schools, whose only main interest is the protection of the children and their education.

In these difficult days, we should also recognise the very serious work that is being done by the National Health Service, particularly those doctors and nurses who are working at the very sharp end of things. I thank every nurse and doctor who is in that front-line service.

#### 11.15 am

I thank the Minister for his attendance today and, indeed, for his previous attendance in the Chamber and his willingness to attend the Committees on a regular basis and, indeed, to give generously of his time when he has attended the Committees, often extending that time to allow Committee members to pose questions and seek advice and answers from the Minister. In that context, it is disappointing that in a press statement to the 'Belfast Telegraph' the proposer of the motion referred to the Minister as ducking and diving. Peter Weir has never ducked and never dived: he has given generously of his time in this situation.

**A Member:** Appalling language.

**Mr Newton:** Appalling language, as my colleague has said.

I welcome the work of the Minister. Initially, in his work with the Department of Education, along with the Minister for Health, the Department of Health, the Education Authority and the Public Health Agency he sought professional advice on handling the situation in our schools with the aim of keeping our pupils safe. The proposer of the motion referred to the Minister as only seeking advice from a

Conservative Government. However, the motion calls on the Minister to seek advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies: I think that is a Government organisation. SAGE has offered advice, and, if I am not wrong on this, the Minister has indicated in his most recent statement that he seeks advice from Dr McBride and Professor Ian Young. I believe that Dr McBride and Professor Young also engage with SAGE as they go about their work.

On 21 December — and the proposer of the motion has referred to it — the Minister indicated that:

*"the Executive agreed to a full return to school with mitigations, as soon as it was safe to do so".*

Within the Executive are, obviously, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, Minister Murphy, Minister Mallon, Minister Long and Minister Swann. So the Minister and the Executive agreed on the safe return to schools.

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

**Mr Newton:** I will give way.

**Mr McCrossan:** Will the Member please enlighten us as to what mitigations the Minister has put in place because no one can seem to find the detail?

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

**Mr Newton:** If you look at the end of the Minister's statement, you will see an indication of the direction in which the Minister is going and, indeed, the statement that you referred to this morning contains the further directions he is taking.

Indeed, the Minister indicated that the Executive, when considering the range of severe but necessary restrictions in the current circumstances, did not seek to close schools. The Minister, in his plans at that time, had the support of his Executive colleagues for his directions. Now, the situation is changing, and it is changing extremely quickly. We know that. We have seen the actions taken in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic, and I commend the Minister for his response to the situation as it stands.

The motion is not unexpected. It is a serious situation that we are playing with, and I know that the Minister recognises its seriousness.

**Ms Brogan:** Sinn Féin is conscious of the impact that the initial wave of school closures had on the lives of our children and young people. At the time, the decision was not taken lightly, and it was taken in the interests of protecting public health and saving lives. Since the school restart in late August, we have been clear that the school setting is the best place to meet the social, developmental and educational needs of our children and young people. We are also aware that, for many, school is often a sanctuary, a place of safety and refuge for some of our most vulnerable children. Sinn Féin wants schools to be open, but it has to be demonstrably safe, sustainable and in line with the scientific and public health advice. Over the last number of months, Sinn Féin has been vocal in calling for scenario planning and contingency planning across all areas of education from examinations to blended learning. At every turn, the Minister dithered.

We welcome the announcement from the Minister this morning. Unfortunately, many questions remain unanswered, and school communities and families still await clarity. The Minister's proposals for remote learning will lead to further disadvantage and exacerbate an already uneven playing field.

Our GCSE students and their families cry out for clarity on the modules that they are due to sit. What measures are being put in place to ensure that pupils are supported in taking those exams at this difficult time? What will happen in the event that a child who should be sitting an exam is forced to self-isolate? The fact is that a distinct lack of contingency planning and preparedness has been a hallmark of Minister Weir's time in office throughout the pandemic. Asked about the work that he was doing in relation to the possibility of future school closures, the Minister remarked that he was not preparing for failure. I argue that failing to prepare was preparing for failure.

Teachers, principals and other essential school staff work tirelessly to maintain a safe school environment. In the absence of the necessary support from the Public Health Agency, they are taking on new roles as track-and-tracers. The pressure on our school communities has been immense. Schools have not had the luxury of decisive and strategic leadership from their Education Minister. In the Chamber, the Health Minister, Robin Swann, said:

*"I do not believe that the return to school as normal in January is a sustainable position."*

The Education Minister's initial plan tinkered around the edges and lacked urgency and

decisiveness. We need to see the advice and recommendations of the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) and the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) in the Department of Health. We need to see exactly what mitigations are required for our schools to remain safe spaces for our children and the education workforce in the time ahead. The new strain and its increased transmissibility is of huge concern to school staff and families. They need reassurance and support, but, most of all, they need to see clear action from the Education Minister.

It is imperative that we do not see a roll-back of the statutory obligations in relation to provision for our children and young people with special educational needs. We must be cognisant of the role of special schools and the support that they provide to children and young people and their families. In the event of a new period of closures, the Minister and the Department must not allow those families to be left behind again. In addition, the Minister must ensure that measures are in place to protect and support the education and well-being of children who are designated as vulnerable.

There are no easy solutions to the problems that we face in relation to education provision during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, above all, we must endeavour to ensure the safety of our school communities and continuity of learning for our children and young people.

**Mr Butler:** At the outset, I want, on the record — I am sure that you will join me — to wish all those involved in the education sector a happy new year. 2020 was a remarkable year that will go down in all our memories and history as one that was tough, regardless of where you sat, what you worked at or what you did. It will have a lasting impact on us all, not least on our mental health to a greater or lesser degree. It has had an impact on everyone in the education sector: students, pupils, teachers, principals, bus drivers and those who work to create school meals. That is why good planning is necessary.

It is good to be here. Sadly, I believe that the debate could have been avoided if we had had the news sooner. Nonetheless, the news is welcome. The steps that the Minister proposes are welcome. Some of them will have been proposed to him previously. We must understand that we are not working in normal circumstances. We talk about risk assessment, but we are actually in times of dynamic risk assessment, which is totally different from risk assessment. We have to make the decisions as best we can, as has been said by the Member across the Chamber, with the medical and

scientific advice to hand, and that changes rapidly. I believe that the Minister was in communication with the Health Minister on that recently. We have to learn from those instances where we can give people that information more quickly, because public confidence is ebbing. We are all responsible — not just the Ministers — for managing that. We all need to be cognisant — I will say this in the spirit of the time of year — of the mental health of every Minister.

Everyone will remember January 2020, when the Assembly came back. Each of the bigger parties had a choice of Departments. The DUP picked Economy and Education, because it believed those to be its priorities. Sinn Féin picked Finance and Communities. The SDLP picked Infrastructure. The Ulster Unionist Party picked Health. I will not condemn any party for picking what it picked. Those were the parties' priorities. Those were the priorities for the DUP. I believe that the Minister may have got some things wrong during his tenure — I am sure that every Minister will have got some things wrong along the way — but what we need to do is ensure that we learn from them. I want to hear a commitment from the Minister at the end of this that he has listened and has looked at the motion, which I signed. I welcomed it because we need to give that leverage and see that change come. To err is human; to forgive, divine: I hope that the Minister can take that in the manner in which it is meant.

**Mr McCrossan:** I take the Member's point, but how many times are we to call the Minister to the House? What will it take for him to actually listen and learn his lessons?

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

**Mr Butler:** Thank you. I thank the Member for his intervention. Perhaps, the Minister could respond to that. I hope that he does so in a positive manner.

There are still issues that we need to address. I will not waste any more time. I will just ask the Minister to address them. I have been inundated, as many Members will have been, because there are still uncertainties about the guidance that has been issued. I welcome the move for special schools. The Committee has met regularly about that sector and has a real passion to see it supported. With regard to special schools, what further mitigations can be put in place, especially around transport? As most of us will know, special schools are a challenging but worthwhile environment in which to work. However, two-metre social

distancing is even more difficult to maintain in those instances. COVID is a live threat, so we need to ensure that those who work in those environments are protected.

The other issue relates to mainstream schools. Further clarification is needed with regard to children who have been statemented and those who are vulnerable. It is my understanding that they will have places in mainstream schools. Can we get confirmation of those mainstream places for children who have statements and children who come under the description of "vulnerable"? Perhaps, the Minister will clear that up in his speech or an intervention.

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

**Mr Butler:** Yes.

**Mr Weir:** While there is a separate category of vulnerable children in special schools who are not counted under the definition of "vulnerable children", broadly speaking, children who have statements are counted under that definition. We found that a relatively small number came under the accurate definition of "vulnerable children" previously. It covers around 30,000 children.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister.

I will spend my last minute and a half on the issue of blended and remote learning. I have had a real concern about it from the start because our teachers have not been instructed in how to use blended and remote learning. They do their very best, and there have been some fantastic examples of it. However, we have digital poverty across Northern Ireland. A mother got in touch with me yesterday. She has five children of school age. She does not have five computers or phones. She has limited broadband. We are agreed that face-to-face teaching is best. In that regard, Minister, has there been an assessment of the impact of remote and blended learning? What I would like to see is that the examination bodies do not test any of our pupils on anything that is learned at home and that everything that is tested is based on face-to-face teaching. I do not think that there is anybody in the House — the proposer of the motion covered this too — who does not desire to see our children in school, but we desire to see them in school safely.

On that, when the schools return in greater number post 11 January, can you give us confidence today that every mitigation that is possible can be put in place to keep our teachers safe and to give our pupils and

parents confidence, with early indications of what they might be?

**11.30 am**

**Mr Lyttle:** Déjà vu, Mr Speaker. The Education Minister who does not want to meet the Education Committee, does not want to engage with the Assembly and does not, it seems, want to make decisions until Gavin Williamson has made his has today again been required to do so by a cross-party, cross-designation Assembly recall for the second time in less than two weeks. It is difficult for me to speak on behalf of the Education Committee today, given that the Education Minister's statement on the important matter of school restart was made via broadcast and social media at approximately 7.00 am on 31 December with no prior engagement with the Education Committee. I am able to say that, for weeks, Education Committee members have expressed serious concern about the Minister's approach to school restart and, in the Assembly on 21 December, called for a phased school restart.

We now have a statement with which to engage, so, speaking as Alliance education spokesperson, I will say this: pausing school-based learning is, of course, a measure of last resort and reflects the seriousness of the situation that we are in. As a community, we must adhere to the regulations to drive down the transmission of the virus to help our children to attend school, but the Education Minister's stubborn refusal to engage the advice of school leaders and, indeed, scientific and medical experts in a timely manner leads to decisions and announcements of this nature that make contingency planning for teachers and for parents distressingly difficult. The decisions should have been taken before the end of term. Our dedicated teaching and non-teaching staff have been left with only one day to prepare for remote and key-worker provision from next week. The Minister has to accept that that approach has to change direction.

The statement has left many more questions than it has given answers. I ask the Minister to be willing to attend an emergency meeting of the Education Committee to deal with those in more detail, but I will endeavour to ask some today.

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

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

**Mr Sheehan:** Thank you very much. Does the Member agree that it does not help parents and

children when the Minister is so categorical and definitive in his statements that schools will open in the first week of January, instead of saying that we will assess the situation, take the medical and scientific advice and act on that?

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

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, I think that that is at the heart of what the Assembly is saying: engage with parents, engage with school leaders and engage with Members of the Assembly to heed those concerns, rather than continuing to adopt this stubborn, dogmatic approach on these extremely dynamic issues.

I ask the Education Minister to outline the scientific and medical basis for the decisions announced today: for example, why four weeks' remote learning for years 8 to 10 and none for special schools, preschools and childcare? Why one week for exam years, with the option, it seems, of no weeks for exam years being given to schools as well? Why one day to prepare for the new arrangements? Will there be, as a previous Member asked, an option for some degree of weekly review, given the seriousness of the situation that we find ourselves in? Will there be extra measures to protect children and adults in special schools? Will there be priority vaccination for teaching and non-teaching staff in schools, particularly in special schools?

Has the Education Minister established the vulnerable children reference group, as recommended by the Education Committee? Will clinically vulnerable children and adults be attending school or is there shielding advice for those in such categories? Why is year 11 not considered to be an exam year? What has the Department of Education done to ensure that every child experiences equal educational opportunity via remote or school-based learning under these arrangements? What enhanced testing and tracing is going to be put in place? How can the Education Minister effectively suspend school-based operations until 11 January for so many of our children and yet support the sitting of transfer tests on 9 January? How can those tests fairly, safely and legally proceed? That is a legitimate question, it is focussed on this year alone and parents have not received a satisfactory answer to that or the question of what the contingency plan is for any child who is unable to sit tests due to a COVID-related absence or after there is further clarification on clinical vulnerability.

The Minister also said that he would extend the use of face coverings, improve compliance on the wearing of face coverings on school buses and devise messaging to improve responsible behaviour among young people. Has he delivered on those issues swiftly as he said he would? There are many, many issues to address here —

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

**Mr Lyttle:** — and I hope that the Minister can do that today.

**Mr M Bradley:** I thank the Minister for attending today, as he has done on many occasions. There are calls for a change of attitude, but we all need to examine our attitudes in this place; there are more than the Minister in this place who need to change their attitudes.

Many teachers have been in contact with me to urge that children be kept at school. Many have expressed the opposite viewpoint. Opinion amongst parents is also divided. For some parents, their children not being at school will have a detrimental impact on their incomes. Many parents work in essential services, fitting their part-time working arrangements around school times. Therefore, no matter what the Minister announced here today, he was not going to please everyone. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

I ask for consideration of the needs of vulnerable children and children who have educational statements; can we afford to interrupt their schedules again? For children and young people who suffer from autism, ADHD or other complex needs, school is a necessary routine and is often the only respite that some parents have. The needs of those children and young people must be given careful consideration.

There are other issues that are a priority. The top priority is education but there is also preparing children for the next stage of their development, whether it is for examinations, transfer from primary to post-primary education, further education or young people going out into employment. Vital learning, development time and experience has been lost.

Going home from here last night, I drove past the local football field. There was a group of children playing in the multi-use games area under floodlights, about nine or 10 of them, and I thought, "What's the impact of all this COVID-19 on the mentality of our young people, on their mental health and on their physical well-

being?". We have to take that into consideration too. There were about nine or 10 of them, but I ask that that be taken into consideration as well.

Schools take thousands of children under their care and nurturing every day. For some, it is an escape, perhaps from abuse at home, and for others it is an opportunity to have at least one full meal in the day. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; no matter what the Minister does, he will please some and disappoint others.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that we are in this dangerous position because the Minister has not put in place the necessary mitigations, protections and resources to ensure that schools can continue?

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

**Mr M Bradley:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for that intervention. Being on the Education Committee, he should be fully aware of all the commitments that the Minister has given, financially and otherwise.

Has anyone assessed the role of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) lately? I imagine that its workload has increased dramatically during the pandemic. Does it have the staff and the resources to cope?

I provide no answers, only questions, and I do not for one minute underestimate the thankless task that the Minister has in trying to navigate the many complex issues that the pandemic has caused to the education of our children, young people and adults. None of it is of the Minister's making. We are all in this together. We are all trying to make decisions that benefit those who send us here to represent them. My appeal is that we do what is best for all of our children and, in doing so, make every effort to consider the impact that our decisions will have, especially on vulnerable children and children who have educational statements. We must endeavour to give clarity and support, including transport, for children, their parents and teachers.

There is no normal in these abnormal times. As we peer through the mist of uncertainty, there is no abnormal answer to make normal again.

**Mr Gildernew:** I welcome the decision that the Minister has made, although it is very late in the day. Surely, the same information was available 10 days ago which would have allowed schools

to plan better. However, we are operating in the overall context of significant and growing health concerns. In that context —.

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

**Mr Gildernew:** Yes.

**Mr Weir:** I appreciate that we are in a moving situation and that the need for additional measures has largely arisen out of the situation post-Christmas. From the chronology of events — I was going to deal with this later — we were contacted on Tuesday evening by the Minister of Health, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) to say that there needed to be a change compared to where we were, and we have been working with them since then. It is difficult, if you like, to retrofit something prior to that when there has been a request for a further change at that particular point.

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

**Mr Gildernew:** I thank the Minister for that intervention.

We are dealing with a situation where yesterday, in the past 24 hours, we have had 2,143 cases. That is 40% of all tests that are coming back as positive. We are looking at two significant mutations: one that emerged in the south of England and one in South Africa, both of which, potentially, have a considerable impact on younger people in terms of transmissibility and the effect and impact on them, and that is very worrying. While we all value education and want to see our children in schools, no more so than teachers themselves, we must recognise that schools are part of our community. They are vulnerable to and part of the transmission of the virus, and we need to take all of the steps that we are taking to recognise that.

We need to know, Minister, what the health and scientific advice is beyond 11 January and when you received the advice about when to open schools. While we all want to see schools open, it must be absolutely safe for them to do so and they must operate in a way that is safe.

At the start of the pandemic, the World Health Organisation issued guidance. Mike Ryan, in particular, said that the enemy in dealing with a virus in a pandemic is delay and that you have to act fast. That advice applies to education just as it does to health.

Too often, we have responded slowly here. We have seen where, at times, we have been too slow to close schools when it was necessary and to deal with the exam situation. We have been too slow at times — and still are — to put in place a proper find, test, trace, isolate and support system that is effective across the community and that supports the continuing educational needs and does not put teachers and children in vulnerable situations. We have been slow to see a blended learning approach being used, which schools are ready and welcome to embrace, in order to prevent further increases in the transmission of COVID-19.

Minister, this is in the context where we have fully devolved education and health systems. We have the opportunity to move quickly, to be agile and to take measures which are appropriate to what is happening here and to the needs of our community. We have, at times, squandered that ability. We need to see more appropriate steps being taken and taken faster in what we are doing here. If we are delaying the reopening of schools, that delay needs to be for a purpose. We need to be doing things with the time that we are putting in place.

So, we need to see better space within schools. We need access to remote or blended learning to be made available to all to ensure that we do not increase inequalities in education, as we have seen increasingly in health. Ventilation issues need to be addressed in schools. As I mentioned earlier, the test and trace system needs to be put in place in schools to let them get on with education and to allow the public health authorities to deal with find, test and trace.

#### 11.45 am

We need to see all those things happening. Too often, we have waited for others to lead and we have then followed that lead. First of all, we should be leading for ourselves — with the devolved powers that we have, there is no reason why we cannot do that. However, to follow England, which has one of the worst track records in the world, is a crucial mistake. We need to tailor our solutions to the situation that we are facing.

To finish, Minister, in the Irish language, the word for Minister is Aire, as you may or may not know; you will hear it occasionally here in the Chamber. The word is Aire. Aire has two other meanings in the Irish language, and they are relevant here. The second meaning is to take care of someone or to protect them. The third meaning of Aire is to listen to, to pay heed to or to pay attention to advice. Minister, we need

you absolutely to be a Minister in every sense of the word.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for coming to the House and for coming to the Education Committee on countless occasions. I am not sure where the myth that the Minister does not make himself available to the Committee has come from. It is simply not true, and I thank the Minister for his attendance. I also congratulate Mr Derek Baker, who recently retired from the position of permanent secretary in the Department of Education and who did so much for our young people's education across Northern Ireland, for the honour that he received in Her Majesty's New Year's Honours List that was announced last night.

COVID has presented challenges to all across our nation. Indeed, no home has been left untouched, some of them tragically with the loss of life. Slowing down and the elimination of this awful pandemic must be our aim, and we surely must work together to do so. Collaborative working across government is essential. The pandemic has forced many Ministers across jurisdictions into the most difficult and unenviable choices. The view of the education sector on school closures is uppermost, I believe, in the Minister's thoughts and decision-making. I commend all Ministers. Surely we are all, sadly, too keen and too swift to criticise, and in this House in particular. As I have said in Committee, I find that, sometimes, members are keen to criticise Ministers from other parties, as opposed to their own. Each and every Minister has difficult decisions to make.

As a governor in two schools, I commend the principals, teachers, classroom assistants and all who are involved in the day-to-day running of our schools for the work that they have done across education in Northern Ireland. I also commend school governors for the difficult decisions that they have had to make. Each and every one of them is to be thanked and commended by the young people and their parents for the role that they have played and the leadership that they have provided in our community.

Like many Members, as stated by Mr Bradley, I have received much correspondence on the issue from teachers, trade unions and parents. It is fair to say that it is a mixed bag. As with everything, Ministers are faced with difficult challenges and competing choices, and COVID presents them with a particularly difficult challenge. Many share the view that children are best placed in the classroom. I agree with that, not just for their education but for their general well-being, mindfulness, social

interaction and development. I share that view and I would like to think that that view is shared across the House. Others take the view that remote learning can and does work. I have no doubt that it can and does, given the right circumstances, familial support, technology, space and environment, but what of those young children who cannot have those resources and that support in place?

Recently, I became aware of a young couple in north Belfast who have three children with autism. They were terrified that schools might be closed and the effect that that would have on their young children who need that routine each day. So I commend the Minister for the decision that he has made on special educational needs, given the young family that I referred to, the challenges that they were facing and the fears that they had for their children.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Member for giving way. Special educational needs is, obviously, an issue that the Education Committee has prioritised. The return to special schools on Monday 4 January will, however, cause some concern, particularly for staff. Does the Member agree that testing, vaccination and additional support for our special schools are needed to ensure the safety of all the children and young people in them?

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

**Mr Humphrey:** Yes. That is something that we have discussed in Committee, and its members have all agreed on that point before. I thank the Member for his intervention, and I do not think that anyone in the House would disagree with him.

The motion calls for the Education Minister to clarify the work that has been undertaken with the Department of Health to protect children, teachers, parents and the wider public from COVID-19. We all must see greater working and collaboration across government; the virus demands it. As I have said before, it is a balance. Many families, particularly young families, are struggling. Many employers will face difficult and hard choices, and many lives and livelihoods will be affected negatively when the furlough scheme comes to an end.

The new strain, which, it appears, spreads particularly among younger people, poses a new threat. Government needs to be nimble and reactive in a way that it has never been before, even during the pandemic over the last 10 months. There are many difficult choices,

and government must be responsive and responsible in making those choices. Therefore, a close, meaningful and ongoing relationship between the Department of Education and the Department of Health is not only desirable in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland but essential. This is a highly dangerous situation. Everyone across government must be flexible and responsive. Yesterday, 2,100 of our people tested positive for the virus. Far too many people have lost their life, and too many families have been affected.

Of course, the other pandemic facing Northern Ireland is that of mental health and general well-being. That is a huge and growing issue in our community, as many families — young families in particular — and parents face the challenges not just of education but of poverty, food shortages, loss of employment and the loss of opportunities to generate wealth. Those things threaten our community —

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

**Mr Humphrey:** — and they require government at all levels to work in a cross-cutting way. I wish the Minister and his colleagues well, but this is something that has to be tackled by everyone in the House being responsible.

**Ms Flynn:** I support the motion and, in particular, the call for clarity from the Education Minister on the return of schools in January. The Education Minister has very recently provided some clarity on the return of schools. The announcement of the decision not to open primary and post-primary schools next week in light of the deteriorating COVID-19 pandemic situation, however belated, is important, and I welcome it.

Sinn Féin has consistently said that we will follow the scientific and health advice in how we respond to the pandemic, and that applies in the context of schools reopening. It is important to recognise that health is not just physical but mental and that we need to protect the mental health and well-being of children and that of their parents and all school staff as well as their physical health in school settings during the pandemic.

In October 2020, the youth well-being survey found that rates of anxiety and depression were around 25% higher in the North compared with Britain. There were differences between the most deprived areas and the least deprived areas. That is really stark, especially when we already know that COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on deprived

communities here. Some children will undoubtedly have experienced anxiety during the pandemic when they have already spent many weeks away from their school, their friends and their normal study routine. They will have been worried about how to prepare for exams and the implications that that might have for them without that support from their friends, who may have had similar worries. They are unable to communicate with one another in the way that kids would be used to.

Similarly, anxiety is experienced by those with children who have special educational needs. It has already been mentioned in the Chamber that those kids need the routine of school, which is really important in their lives. There will also be anxiety among those for whom childcare in the absence of school will be problematic. There is also considerable anxiety for pupils, parents and teachers who are or who live with clinically vulnerable people as they go to school every day, while cases of COVID in the North increase significantly. In addition, we need to consider the implications of the spread of the virus for us all, including the added risk, as has been mentioned, from the new strains of COVID-19, particularly the one that has gripped Britain.

There are no easy answers with regard to school openings during the current wave of the virus. However, the ongoing confusion and slowness in decision-making in the Department of Education compounds some of the stress and anxiety that is already being experienced by children, parents and school staff. The Minister's recent statement provides some clarity in the short term with regard to the first week of the school term, but there is much uncertainty about the way forward and what contingencies will be put in place for schools, particularly in the event of the situation deteriorating further. Hopefully, that will not happen.

A few Members have said — it is referred to in the motion — that the Education Minister needs to be really clear with parents and school leaders with regard to the scientific and public health advice that he has received from the Department of Health. He needs to say what that specific advice was and when he received it. The health and scientific advice must be the basis of our approach. As I said, it will protect us not just from the physical impact of the coronavirus but also the mental health of our young people, parents, families and all the school staff.

**Mr McNulty:** I thank you, Mr Speaker and all the Members who supported the SDLP recall

petition, which allows us to hold the Minister to account on this most important issue.

We must take a moment to thank our teachers and school staff. We should put ourselves in their shoes, going daily into a classroom with 30-plus pupils, fearing for their own health and the health of their families. They still do it because they believe passionately in educating our young people. Those teachers, school staff and principals should be applauded.

It is abhorrent that we are discussing this on New Year's Eve. We have been banging the drum on the issues over and over again at the Education Committee, at Ad Hoc Committees, at the Minister's Question Time and via written questions to the Minister. We have not had the answers, and it is sad that it has come to this.

I am really worried about the vulnerable and at-risk children whose safe haven is school, those with special educational needs, those do not have educational support at home and those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. I worry about the mental, emotional and physical health of our children and young people. We all recognise that the best place for children is school, but we also recognise that the galloping COVID figures have forced this move.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he also recognise that the reason we are in this situation is that the Minister has not acted quickly enough throughout the pandemic to put in place mitigations, protections and resources so that schools can continue educating our children in a safe environment?

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

**Mr McNulty:** I absolutely agree.

As recently as last week — just over a week ago — I was banging this drum again, asking you, Minister, what the mitigations and the contingency plans were. That detail has not been forthcoming and still is not there. I ask you again, Minister: what are the mitigations you will put in place to allow children to be educated safely and keep safe teachers and school staff, families and parents? What are the resources?

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

**Mr McNulty:** Of course.

**Mr Newton:** I know that the Member shares my concern for children who are at school on a

regular basis but are at risk in their own home. There are 2,000 such children across Northern Ireland. The Member will have noticed the Barnardo's adverts, where a child pleads to be allowed to return to school.

Will the Member agree with me that the partnership with Health, as explained by the Minister, should be extended to include the beefing-up or increased professionalism of the family intervention teams in Health and Education to address the issue of at-risk children?

**12.00 noon**

**Mr McNulty:** I thank the Member for his contribution. I fully agree. However, the Minister must take responsibility for that as well. The Minister is responsible for ensuring that every child is safe. He has a role to play in ensuring every child is safe.

Minister, in terms of the transfer test, I applaud the brave moves of the principals in Newry: the Abbey Christian Brothers, St Colman's College, Our Lady's Grammar School and the Sacred Heart Grammar School. They made an early and brave decision when it was not popular in many quarters, but it was the right decision. Now, we have heard much about a level playing field. How is there a level playing field across this part of the island? There was a lack of leadership and consistency and, Minister, that is down to you.

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

**Mr McNulty:** I am sorry, I cannot give way. I am running out of time.

Minister, it is fair to say that you have not put children first. You have put your political allegiances first. We needed leadership and a consistent approach, and that has not happened.

What pressure are you bringing to bear on the Health Minister to ensure that teaching staff are prioritised for vaccinations to enable schools to get back to open normally as quickly as possible? What pressure have you brought to bear on the Health Minister to ensure that prioritisation, especially for staff in special schools?

There is a widening education gap. How will that be addressed, Minister? Parents are now at home with their head in their hands because they recognise the impact this closure will have on their children, especially those children with

special educational needs. Parents see their children falling further behind. Minister, what additional resources will you bring to bear to help those children to catch up? What additional resources will you give to support teachers to enable those children to catch up? What additional resources will you put in place to support children whose mental, emotional and physical health has been adversely impacted by the pandemic and this latest closure? I recognise that the closure is necessary, but what additional resources will be brought forward to help teachers and staff ensure that children can catch up and that their mental, physical and emotional health has not been too adversely impacted? Minister, I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I declare an interest as chair of the board of Movilla High School in Newtownards. I want to put on record my admiration for the principal, Mr Bell, the senior leadership team, the teachers and the non-teaching staff for providing a continuity of teaching and learning through this health crisis.

I do wonder what this session is intended to achieve. Is it just to give the Minister a verbal beating? If it is, fair enough, I suppose that that is part of the political mix, and I know there are many who think that the Minister deserves a verbal beating. However, surely there is more to it than that.

When we sit in Committee, as we all do, we have a statutory duty to assist and advise Ministers in their work. I would like to assist and advise this Minister, but it is essential to have a little bit more about information about his thinking. For example, as I understand it, his original intention was that children would go back to school for a couple of weeks to allow teachers to prepare to deliver remote learning. However, now, because of changing circumstances, they get two days to prepare for remote learning. In his remarks, can the Minister expand on his thinking about that change, and the impact and challenge that it presents to teachers, such as the teachers I represent at Movilla High School?

The second issue is a concern about whether the transfer test will go ahead as scheduled. We are all used to risk assessment graphs where the horizontal axis assesses how likely an adverse event is to happen: 0, being not likely; 5, being almost certain. The vertical axis assesses the impact should it happen: 0, being not very likely and 5, being, potentially, calamitous.

I would like to know where the dot is in the Department's risk assessment of those exams not going ahead, because I suspect that we are much closer to it being where 5 meets 5 than where 0 meets 0. I would really appreciate the Minister's saying where the dot is and what the contingency plan is should this come to pass. That is very important to us, particularly the Committee chaired by Mr Lyttle, in being able to assist and advise the Minister.

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

**Mr Nesbitt:** I will.

**Mr Butler:** On that point about testing, does the Member agree that another question that primary schools will want to be answered is on whether they can open to provide help to children who may sit the test very soon?

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

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank my colleague for his intervention. I look forward to the Minister's addressing that as well.

I will not use all my time, but I want to raise just one other issue, and it is in regard to following scientific and medical advice. I note that some politicians are saying today that teachers should be prioritised for the COVID-19 vaccine. Of course I would like teachers to get the vaccine as soon as possible — I would like everybody to get it as soon as possible — but, in the real world, we have to have a list, and we have to have priorities. If we are truly to follow the scientific and medical advice, we must follow the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). I will read what it says into the record:

*"The Committee considered evidence on the risk of exposure and risk of mortality by occupation. Under the priority groups advised below, those over 50 years of age, and all those 16 years of age and over in a risk group, would be eligible for vaccination within the first phase of the programme. This prioritisation captures almost all preventable deaths from COVID-19, including those associated with occupational exposure to infection. As such, JCVI does not advise further prioritisation by occupation during the first phase of the programme."*

That is the clear, open, transparent scientific and medical advice. Are we following it? Or do we follow it only when it suits a party political agenda?

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank the Member for giving way. I am glad that he raised the issue of the JCVI advice. There is an official list and scientific backing of the order in which people will be offered or will receive the vaccine. It is worth mentioning that one solution would be, as far as possible, to speed up the vaccination process. Does he agree that the House should be supporting the Minister of Health and giving him every resource that he needs to roll out the vaccine much more quickly? The process is already quick, which is very welcome, but, with a bit more resource and a bit more thought behind it, it could be quicker so that everybody who wants the vaccine could receive it even sooner than planned.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for her intervention. I support the Minister 100%, and I know that Mr Swann will roll out the vaccine as quickly as he can. With the full support of his ministerial colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive, it will be quicker.

I will finish by wishing the House, and, indeed, society, a happy new year and a happier 2021. Mr Humphrey was modest when congratulating Mr Baker. Mr Humphrey is also on the New Year's Honours List, and I congratulate him on that. Members, let us work together on this. Happy new year.

**Mr O'Dowd:** It is a very sad day. It is a very worrying day. The fact that we are closing our schools again is an acknowledgement that, despite the measures taken, COVID-19 is rapidly spreading in our society. Many vulnerable people are at risk of dying, and our health service is at risk of being overrun, if it is not already being overrun. At the end of an awful year, this day marks what the year has been about: missed opportunities, lives put on hold and lives lost.

I am a father and a legislator. When I look at my children, I am worried about them. I am worried about them missing out on education, and I worry about their mental health and well-being.

My children are lucky because they are in a loving, caring family. The heating will be on today. There is food in the cupboard. They will have access to electronic devices for their education. However, the reality is that there are thousands of children who do not have those luxuries. Well, food is not a luxury; it is a right. Heating is a right.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Member for giving way. He makes a salient point. The point that a principal in my constituency made to me was

that, for many of those children, school is the only normality in their day, unfortunately. It is where, as another Member said, they get their only square meal of the day. We need to be mindful of those issues when those very difficult decisions are made. All those issues must be taken into consideration.

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** I must declare an interest as the vice-chairperson of a board of governors.

I am very concerned about where society is going with regard to COVID-19 infection rates. My colleague the Chairperson of the Committee for Health pointed out that there have been missed opportunities; in particular, the failure to put in place a proper test-and-trace regime in society. In my opinion, that has led to continued, wider spread of the virus.

To anyone who is planning a New Year's Eve party tonight, I will be perfectly honest: I hope that the police knock on your door. You are putting yourselves and other members of society at risk. You are denying children their education. If you are planning a party, I say: please, do not do it. If you do, the police have every right to knock on your door and you should be duly dealt with through the legal process. How dare you place society's health at risk? How dare you deny our children their education?

We, as legislators, have responsibilities as well. The Minister has responsibilities in this. He may be familiar with this quote: we are "condition-led, not calendar-led". That was the DUP's battle cry in 2006 during the negotiations that led to the re-establishment of these institutions. However, it would now appear that the DUP is calendar-led. To have set a date and time for schools to return on 4 January was not realistic. We have seen it time and time again. We saw it after the summer break, in October and again in November, when the DUP set dates in time, said restrictions would be lifted on such and such a date, and said that there would be only a two-week lockdown. Folks, the COVID-19 virus does not work to school timetables. It is not realistic for the Minister to say that schools will reopen in normal fashion in one, two or three weeks' time. The Minister must plan for the potential that schools will remain closed for a significant period. That must be planned for. The DUP, in general, must accept that we may be in restrictions for a significant period, and that setting a date in the calendar will not work for us. So let us work on that basis.

The reason that I say that the Minister must plan for it is this: blended learning. What is it? What does it mean in reality for many young people out there? Parents are educators, but they are not teachers. They cannot be expected to be children's teachers. We rely on the teaching profession for that. It needs support to be able to provide online learning to pupils. That online learning also needs to be quality controlled. It needs to be checked for quality. We need to ensure its quality delivery into children's homes. Therefore, the Minister has a lot of planning to do. He must not think for one second that schools will open on a date because he has said it.

What concerns me most is this: the Minister has set his agenda with regard to the transfer tests on 9 January. For generations, the education system was planned around the 11-plus. We reached the stage where, for a certain part of the year, a section of the class was sat at the back of the classroom with colouring books and pencils and was told to colour in while the rest of the class were educated. I ask the Minister: please, do not go back to that mentality. We now have an education system in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis that is being directed towards the needs of the minority instead of the majority. Many say that we have to follow the scientific advice in relation to COVID. They are absolutely right. Why do we not follow the evidence in relation to academic selection? Why do we not listen to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child —

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** — the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission? It is time to educate everyone, not just a few.

**12.15 pm**

**Ms Armstrong:** I have not written a speech because, to be honest, I have received so many emails from parents over the last few days that my head was spinning, so all I can do is declare an interest as the parent of a pupil in an exam year and as a member of the boards of governors of Strangford College and of Portaferry Integrated Primary School.

What I can say as a parent of an exam year student is that mental health is a problem for our young people. I absolutely agree that they should be in school when they are safe to be in school, but the mental health of teenagers is being fundamentally harmed by the dithering

and the not knowing and the trying to guess what the heck is going to come next. COVID is at the core of all of this, but Minister, honestly, it is time to take leadership and be clear and honest with our pupils and our teachers.

Today is the last working day before schools are returning and today is the day that our heads and teachers get the announcement. I think that we owe them an apology. As an Assembly we should be saying sorry for putting that pressure on our teachers because tomorrow will not be a bank holiday for them and it will not be a celebration of New Year's Day. They will be planning what the heck is going to happen next week.

I am quite happy to say sorry to our teachers, to our classroom assistants and to those pupils. It was left far too late for this decision. Scotland and Wales were able to plan ahead but we had to wait until Westminster finally gave the go-ahead before we did something here.

I will take everyone back to the scientific advice or the information that has been called for in the motion. I ask you, Minister, to give us an outline of the scientific and medical advice that you have been provided with, including what SAGE said in December. I also ask you to clarify the work that you have been doing with the Minister of Health, and I thank you for that. Mr Bradley referred to CAMHS. Where are they, because, to be honest, I cannot get a hold of them for love nor money? I appreciate that CAMHS is underfunded. It is up to the Executive to ensure that it has enough funding.

Our pupils are looking for mental health support and we cannot even get it through schools because the family support networks that were put in place for those people are not there, because of COVID. I ask you to clarify what the medical and scientific advice is.

Can I also ask you about the vaccination programme? Mr Nesbitt mentioned it earlier. I consider teachers to be key workers, in particular teachers of children with special educational needs. They are key workers. They are the very people who are working with some of the most vulnerable children across society. Where are they on the lists? Where are they on the vaccination programme? Will you please clarify what work has been done with Health to discuss those teachers, because those pupils are going back next week and will be in school? Some of those pupils have both physical and mental health issues and some of those children can be very ill. To catch COVID is life ending. Why has the vaccination programme not included them? To those who talk about the

Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), — if I have got that right — Northern Ireland is not included on that list. We are taking note of it and we are following that advice. Northern Ireland can actually change its vaccination priorities to include special educational needs teachers and classroom assistants.

The other thing, Minister, is that you talk about vulnerable children. I am very glad to see that there will be support for vulnerable children. However, I speak day in and day out, including weekends, with parents of children who cannot get educational psychologist support to have a statement made, so those children are being denied access to schools. They are not being classified as vulnerable children. They do not have the opportunity because they are not getting access to educational psychologists. We know that you are recruiting more, but, my goodness, this is just so frustrating. Our special educational needs schools are some of our most oversubscribed. In particular, I will mention Killard House School, a fabulous school that could be filled four times over. Where do those children go? They go into mainstream and if they cannot get a statement, that is it — they are left out.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member also agree that mitigations around school transport, particularly special school transport, will be essential to limit the transmission of the virus?

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

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

To be honest, it gets my geek up when you start talking about transport. When somebody has their head right at the knee of a person in order to attach their wheelchair to the floor of a bus, of course they are coming into close contact so why would they not receive a vaccine?

As has been mentioned by others, GCSEs are starting from 11 January, and we still do not know what the COVID tariff will be. Minister, has the CCEA provided you with any contingency plans? That is one thing that would finally help some of those teenagers who are driving their parents to distraction. What is happening with that COVID tariff? We have a week now in which those pupils may or may not be in school; whether there will be any classes for those children depends on their school as there will be remote learning.

So, there are a lot of questions, which is why I am glad that we are debating the motion, although I am sad that we had to bring the Minister to the House in this way. It is a difficult time for everyone, but it is time that we recognised that our teachers have just been put under some of the most intense levels of stress that we could ever have put them under. We did not have to do that; we could have said before Christmas that we knew rightly that this was going to happen because we knew that there were going to be problems. Minister, I ask you today to please give us some clarity, please explain exactly what that medical advice was and please be fair to our pupils.

**Mr McGrath:** First of all, I want to highlight that I am saddened, dismayed and somewhat depressed that we are having to have this debate. The Minister has had to be proverbially trailed here, kicking and screaming. This is the third time that the Minister has had to be brought back to the House to discuss the decisions that he has or has not taken, much to the dismay of those who are working in the various sectors. That reflects that the Minister is failing the sector that he is here to protect

A recall, as we know, is used when a Minister is not listening, is not doing what is reasonably asked of them and is refusing to listen to logic and sense. I fear that, in this instance, we have a Minister who is out of touch, out of his depth and out of tune with the thoughts and concerns of the people in the education sectors, namely the parents, the teachers, the support staff, the unions and, indeed, the children.

The Minister told us up until 7.30 this morning that schools are safe places. He said that schools are the best places for our children and that hard-working parents need somewhere to send their children. The Minister stated at the last meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee that schools were not safe places, yet he has now introduced a number of changes that go nowhere near far enough to address the issues that parents, principals, teachers, unions and children have highlighted. Minister, you are failing them all. His argument for delivering education in the classroom could work if he and his Department did something — anything — to help make those schools safer than anywhere else.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, in many ways, what has happened is too little, too late?

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

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Member for her intervention. That is pretty much the mantra of the Minister: too little, too late. That is what we have seen throughout the 10 months of the pandemic.

The special needs sector is a specific strand of the educational establishment and is quite bespoke in its delivery. Parents, principals and teachers from that sector have raised their concerns and want to see them addressed too. I welcome that the special needs sector will open on Monday, because much of its work is as much therapeutic as it is educational, but it needs to have its questions answered too. What protections are there for the staff in that sector? Are there any special mitigations for them? Is transportation being delivered correctly and safely? Figures released yesterday indicate that three times as many cases of COVID in special needs schools are among the staff than are among the children. So, what is being done to protect the staff in that sector? As ever, we see half a decision from the Minister, which leaves us with more questions than answers.

What of the children who have special needs but attend mainstream schools? What protections are in place for them? When do they restart? What will they do next week? If they do not attend next week, what do they do at home? What extra support is in place for them? Again, we get half a decision that leaves us with more questions than answers, which is totally failing the children of Northern Ireland.

It is worth remembering that we do not want to see schools closing. The SDLP is not here to shut schools; quite the opposite. We want to see schools opened, but done so safely. For those that must reopen, as directed by today's ministerial decision, how do our principals prepare to reopen safely on Monday? Today is New Year's Eve, tomorrow is New Year's Day and then it is the weekend. One principal contacted me today and said, "Pass on our thanks to the Minister for managing to wreck whatever New Year's Eve principals were going to have with their families." Failing the sector, once again, with last-minute, knee-jerk reactions, rather than being planned and strategic.

The Minister would do well to remember an old adage: he has two ears and one mouth because he is expected to do twice as much listening as talking. I suggest that the Minister goes out and engages with the principals, teachers, unions, parents and even the pupils. There is a secondary-school students' union that is headed up by one of my constituents

Cormac Savage. Listen to what those students are saying.

**Mr McCrossan:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that it is regrettable that the Minister of Education waited until yesterday to engage with the Minister of Health, the CMO and the CSA regarding reducing the risk of COVID in schools, particularly after warnings for weeks from the Education Committee and Members of the House?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has already had an extra minute. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McGrath:** I thank the Member for his intervention. We hear time and time again from the sector that it is too little, too late. They are not being given the time to prepare and deliver. If you engage with all those sectors, you will hear what they are saying, and it is the same as us. We want schools to reopen but we want them to be safe. We want our children to learn but not to compromise their safety to do so. We want them to be educated but not in a manner that endangers their educators. We want them to learn, and the Minister needs to learn too. Stop failing the education sector, learn to listen to it and do the right thing.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Rachel Woods. I remind the Member that the longer that she takes, the less time that Mr Carroll will have to speak. I want to try to maximise the time that each Member has to speak.

**Miss Woods:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. That could have been said to other MLAs before me.

It is somewhat of a *déjà vu* that we are here today to discuss our schools and the pandemic. We have been here before. Earlier this year, schools and parents took it upon themselves to take children out of the physical buildings, only to be told weeks later, at the end of March, that schools would be closed and children should stay at home. Parents, if they were not designated as key workers, heeded calls not to send their children to school. Many had already made that decision, well before the Executive, who were somewhat behind the curve in their decision-making, moved. This week, parents have been making the same decision. Many pupils were not going back the classroom next week regardless of any decision taken by the Minister this morning.

Some children have had to spend their holidays preparing for AQE tests, which I note in the announcement are being pushed ahead with.

Why is it that exams are to go ahead in light of this? We have not seen the scientific or medical evidence and advice received by the Minister that says that it is safe for schools to reopen on 11 January for children, teachers, staff, assistants, bus drivers, chefs and cooks, lollipop men and women and so on, let alone what mitigations are in place above and beyond what is there at the moment to reduce the spread of COVID during the period in which the students and staff are required to be in the buildings? What will change the week after next? Have additional resources been given to schools or pupils? Has there been any guidance? What about our SEN pupils and the most disadvantaged or vulnerable who will be accessing blended learning, as Mr Butler mentioned?

I note that childcare provision is to remain open, which is crucial and I welcome, but has additional support been given to the key workers who will look after our children? Some are worried about mixing with pupils who have been mixing with others over the festive period when infection rates were increasing. Someone who contacted me suggested a phased return, with different year groups or bubbles returning from the middle of January. Can that be considered, Minister, and will people be given enough notice?

What additional resources can be put in place to ensure children and young people's safety and support for their mental and emotional health? As many will know, in the last Northern Ireland Youth Forum survey, 67% of the thousands of respondents identified education and learning as a key theme that they were worried about. The survey also said that 45% did not feel safe in their workplace, school or college due to COVID.

Minister, what, if any, engagement, conversation and consultation on this has there been with children and young people whose voices deserve to be and must be heard? I hope that the Minister will, perhaps, do a youth press conference to answer those important questions.

### 12.30 pm

There is a lack of a coherent plan, and the Executive are clearly not speaking with one voice on this. Then there is the timing of the announcement, only a few days before the start of term. Did the Minister engage with schools, boards of governors, teaching unions, parents and pupils on this decision? If not, when will he and when will his Department? Is five days

enough time to allow parents to make arrangements for childcare? We know that we need the details. We need clarity and we need the Executive to follow the scientific and medical evidence. We need a clear plan and we need the evidence to be published. However, if that is not possible, we need an expert-led COVID task force to do so if we are to curb COVID-19 through effective decision-making processes and a coherent response.

**Mr Carroll:** It is utterly disgraceful that the Education Minister dug his heels in for so long, stubbornly refusing to listen to the Health Minister, the CMO, the Chief Scientific Adviser, SAGE and many other people, to keep schools running as normal in the middle of a pandemic that is sweeping through our communities and taking the lives of workers, including education workers. True to form — true to his tenure as Education Minister this year — he has performed another U-turn, which has caused increased anxiety for those in education.

The reality is that this Minister — indeed, this House — knew that cases had risen at an exponential rate in the past few weeks, and while the Executive's handling of the pandemic has been a disaster, Mr Weir certainly tops the class for incompetence, for sure. How many U-turns has he performed this year? Too many to count. More U-turns than Mickey Marley's roundabout. The Minister is not fit for the job. These are people's lives that we are talking about. We are talking about protecting people in our schools from a deadly virus and from a new variant of it, which is spreading through our communities at a much quicker rate.

The motion rightly references:

*"the concerns of teachers, pupils and parents".*

Throughout the pandemic, the Minister has essentially ignored and sidelined those voices. The Minister's latest U-turn has been forced in part by pressure from the unions that represent teachers and education workers, and I thank them for their work. I say to them directly that if the Minister continues to put you and your pupils at risk, I will wholeheartedly support you if you take action, including walking out or refusing to go into unsafe working conditions. I hope that other Members will stand by you as well.

I have said repeatedly that the Executive have, too often, followed the Tory approach to tackling the crisis. The Education Minister has really turned that into a virtue and certainly wins the award for being an ardent Tory follower.

Again, he acts only after a Tory Minister belatedly acts, refusing to listen to the concerns of those who know the day-to-day reality of working in education and those who know the reality of the virus and what it represents. What message does it send to education workers that the Minister waited until the final day of the year, only a few days before schools were due to reopen, to announce this backtracking? Waiting until the eleventh hour again, when I and many others predicted that a situation would likely occur. No bland statements about people needing access to education will suffice here. We know the importance of education, but, I repeat, we are dealing with a pandemic.

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

**Mr Carroll:** I will.

**Mr McCrossan:** Does the Member agree that, as a suggestion, the Minister could spend a week or two in a classroom, surrounded by 30 kids and with no protective mitigations or resources in place, just to see what our teachers and schoolchildren are going through?

**Mr Speaker:** I advise the Member that he has about one minute left.

**Mr Carroll:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would certainly support that suggestion.

We know the importance of education, but, I repeat, we are dealing with a pandemic that is ripping through our communities. Of course the classroom is an important part of education in normal times but it should not be the only method of education. Ultimately, the Minister's approach is to defend a system that is already failing so many people in our society. It is quite ironic that although the Minister and his party often talk about working-class Protestants being failed by the education system, they are willing to defend the system, even in the middle of a pandemic.

The Minister has been operating on the basis that schoolchildren are not at risk from the virus. He sneered at my suggestion many months ago that pupils should wear masks on public transport but has, eventually, acceded to that request. In England, we have seen that year 8 pupils are the second-highest infected group, and the rate is rising there.

The Minister has taken some belated action to push back the schools' opening date, but the reality is that it is likely to be nowhere near enough in a situation where the Executive have said that people should work at home if they

can and where all but essential services are closed until the end of January at the earliest.

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Carroll:** Why is the Minister willing to put the health and lives of so many education workers and their families at risk? He is not fit for the job, and he should step aside. If he does not, he should be forced to do so.

**Mr Weir:** I thank all those who have taken part in the debate, many of whom have made cogent and valued contributions. There has been an element of ping-pong across the table, which is, perhaps, not unexpected. On the last day of the year, I thank all those in the education sector for all their work this year. It is important that we acknowledge that. All of us throughout society are working in difficult circumstances, but I applaud that work that has been done to meet the challenges. I also add my congratulations to my colleague, Mr Humphrey, and the former permanent secretary, Derek Baker, on their honours, along with those in the education system who also received honours.

My priority is to try to ensure that we get the best possible education for our young people and sustain their life chances. I make absolutely no apology for trying to meet my objective of keeping schools open and keeping face-to-face teaching. I agree with the first half of what Mr O'Dowd said in that regard: it is a tragic day whenever action of this nature has to be taken. Any action taken that causes disruption should be a last resort. I want to minimise the disruption.

Regardless of the situation, even with the support measures that can be put in place, it is undoubtedly the case that delayed openings, school closures, remote learning or blended learning are all second-best for our children; face-to-face teaching delivers most. It is not simply a matter of whether there is a device in the household: there is no adequate substitute for face-to-face teaching. Whatever actions are taken, any disruption to education will hit those who are disadvantaged most. Undoubtedly, even with remote learning or, indeed, in any circumstances, that those from families who are better off financially and can provide that level of support, those who are the brightest in the land will always survive and maybe even thrive. However, for those who are disadvantaged and do not have that level of support and can respond much better in the classroom, anything else is second-best. Any action that is being

taken has to be done with the highest level of reluctance.

Members talked about listening. I think that I have been at the Education Committee more than 20 times in 2020. We may not always agree, but it is not the case that I am, in some way, deficient in being in front of the Committee. I have not checked any figures, but I suspect that that is the most times for any Minister.

**Mr Lyttle:** Is the Minister willing to give way?

**Mr Weir:** I want to get through this *[Interruption.]* That is fair enough. Some Members have been very balanced in what they have said. If that was replicated elsewhere, I would maybe, at times, be keener to give way.

Let us be under no illusions. When it comes to the issues around reopening schools, it has been, at times, suggested that there is a unified voice calling for one particular course of action: that is simply not the case. It may well be that the loudest voices will say a particular thing, but, as Education Minister, I probably get more correspondence from individuals than anybody else. There are, undoubtedly, large numbers of teachers who will say that we need to delay and that further things need to happen, and there are some parents who will say that. It is undoubtedly the case that I have also had quite a lot of messages from teachers and principals saying that they want to go back on 4 January — that has been their fairly consistent position — and overwhelmingly from parents who do not want to see any interruption in their children's education. If we are talking about listening, it is undoubtedly the case that there are a range of voices that need to be listened to.

Critically, and at the heart of this, is listening to medical and scientific advice. I must listen when I get it, and react to it. Given the speed and course of the pandemic, one of the issues is that, at times, changes have to be made at very short notice. Circumstances change greatly.

Let me make it clear that I have worked closely with Robin Swann, the health officials, the CMO and CSA. We worked closely before the Executive agreed the position at the start of the summer with the initial opening. When changes had to be made to move towards full reopening in September, we took advice and held discussions with them. Before the statement on 21 December, there were discussions with them. Indeed, on that very day, we held discussions with the officials of the CMO and CSA, and I spoke directly to the CMO. So,

throughout, any actions that have been taken have been the by-product of that joint working.

That is undoubtedly the case with this decision as well. Part of the mitigations, and the timing, were to allow for preparation, not just for schools, but for parents. There was an expectation that, with the new variant, we may face into a situation whereby late January and February may become a very dangerous period.

Since then, over the last 10 days, things have moved on dramatically. Most significantly, they have moved on with regard to the figures. A week or two ago, they were running in the mid-400s. Shortly before Christmas, it was around 700. However, in a matter of a few days, they moved to over 2,000. Statistically, there may be small question marks over some of the figures, on the basis that they are delayed results. However, there is no doubt that we are facing an unprecedented and deteriorating situation. With the vaccine coming, it is hoped that this will be a temporary position, but a major threat is out there. I have consistently said that I agree with the Health Minister that we should not reopen as normal.

The Department and I were contacted on Tuesday evening by the Health Minister, the CMO and CSA. They said that further measures needed to be taken. We spent yesterday in discussions and in consultation with them. Initially, there were meetings between the officials of the CMO and CSA, earlier in the day. Then I had the opportunity to meet directly and discuss the issue with the Minister of Health, the CMO and CSA at 4.00 pm yesterday.

I appreciate that one of the accusations is that we are following England. It is very difficult, but I do not suggest that there is any blame on either side. If we had a meeting at 4.00 pm to try to do something before what happened at 3.30 pm yesterday, it is a little bit difficult to do. We continued to work on that. The statement was worked on until about midnight last night. The idea was to try to get these decisions out as quickly as possible, given the circumstances.

We are seeing a deteriorating situation. It is believed that the new variant is in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in all the jurisdictions. I echo the words of Minister O'Dowd on this. At the moment, the key driver seems to be the activities of people before Christmas. In some cases, they were very irresponsible activities. Indeed, had people behaved responsibly throughout this, we would be in a much stronger position. I also echo his remarks to

heed the words of the Chief Medical Officer and the Minister of Health, particularly as regards this evening. Stay at home. Do not have a New Year's Eve party. If you have planned one, cancel it.

This is, above all, a time to act as responsibly as possible. For us all, this involves not just the implications for us as individuals, but the direct health threat to the elderly, the vulnerable and the impact it will potentially have, down the line, on children's education. There is a choice for everyone in this society. You can play your part in combating the virus or, alternatively, you can take action to help prevent it.

Mention has been made of the SAGE paper. There is probably some misunderstanding about this. The latest SAGE paper was produced shortly before Christmas. I have seen, read and taken it into account. That paper highlighted some of the problems, particularly for children and young people. It is not accurate to say that the paper made any form of recommendation for school closures. It highlighted the problems and damage that would be done to young people by school closures and a number of other things.

#### **12.45 pm**

First, whether this is on the SAGE paper or internationally, it is undoubtedly the case that the direct clinical threat to children is extremely low. We know that, of those who have died from the virus, over 90% have been aged 65 and over. Children are in a very low-risk group. It is also the case that, whether this is from the SAGE paper, the advice of the PHA or, indeed, from international experience from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, nowhere is risk-free, and I think that everyone will accept that. For example, there is no difference in the number of education staff and teachers who have tested positive for COVID than the rest of society. There is clear and strong evidence of child-to-child transmission; there is considerable evidence of adult-to-adult transmission; it is relatively rare for any form of transmission to occur between adults and children.

It is also the case that if you talk closely to the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser, their concerns about schools are not within the classroom. If I get the chance, I will outline some of the measures within the classroom. Basically, it is not what is happening in the classroom that is the problem. They will say very clearly that it is the behaviour that happens outside the classroom. Indeed, SAGE was not able to distinguish between the impact

of schools and the impact of the wider context. There are issues around the fact that, when schools are open, there is additional mobility, a greater level of contact between adults, at times there is irresponsible behaviour at the school gates, it effectively frees up adults to engage more socially and gives some of the younger children greater opportunities for socialisation outside of school. There is a tendency towards increased activity when children are at school.

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

**Mr Weir:** I am trying to get through a number of aspects in relation to that.

We do need to make it clear that, while whatever additional measures can be taken will be taken, it is not principally the problem of the structures that are within the school gates. It is what is happening beyond, and indeed trying to break and reduce the levels of contact is the reason behind this, particularly the first week that is being targeted.

The Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser feel that the likely situation is that the first week will be the peak week after what has worked through from Christmas. It is the most important week to keep people apart and reduce contact within the community as a whole, and that is why that week is being targeted. We can say that schools are very much an at-risk place, and there is risk everywhere. However, schools are relatively low-risk compared to the levels of risk in the wider community, and that has not changed.

Mitigation measures have been put in place. First, catch up and mental health have been mentioned. The Executive has put £12 million into the Engage programme to support catch up. Similarly, an additional COVID recovery fund of about £5 million has been put in place to support mental health and well-being. At best, if there was more money available, could more be done? I am sure it could be, but we have to live within the opportunities that are there.

I concur with what has been said about vaccinations. We are working with Health to see what more can be done to roll out testing. I am very much at one with what people have said about prioritising vaccinations, particularly for special schools and teachers. I have absolutely no problem with that. To be fair, I have written to the Health Minister on this and urged that that be done. Certainly, my understanding is that Northern Ireland is part of the four nations JCVI.

Therefore, it does not lie entirely in the hands of the Health Minister, to be fair to him. In prioritising, the JCVI has taken a clinical view, which means that, overwhelmingly, in the early stages, vaccination will be based on age. As I indicated, two thirds of those who have died were over the age of 80; over 90% were over the age of 65. They are also the people who are most vulnerable to being seriously ill. However, I would like teachers to move to vaccination as quickly as possible. Again, to be fair to the Health Minister — I seem to be defending him today — any extra resources to speed up the process will be helpful. The key determinant will not be the logistics or the availability of people; it will be the extent of the vaccine that we get as part of the UK's share. There is a wider call to be made to the UK Government to take any action that they can to speed up provision. I have no doubt that, in Northern Ireland, everything will be done to administer whatever we get as quickly as is humanly possible. The sooner that can be done, the better.

An issue was raised about the teachers of vulnerable groups and children of key workers. In the first phase of the pandemic, the number of those children who came in was relatively small. Teachers are not being asked to do face-to-face teaching and provide remote learning simultaneously. It would be impossible, and no one is suggesting that. Critically, this is about providing space for those children to be in school. As mentioned, for many vulnerable children, unfortunately, the risk of being at home can be much greater than the risk of being at school. It is about providing that space. In terms of equality of provision, it is not a question of, for example, one year 8 group being taught in school while another year 8 group has the provision of remote learning; there will be equality across the board on that.

I want to clarify the position on examinations, particularly those that will impact on years 11, 12 and 13. Around 26,000 children will do GCSE examinations between 11 January and 14 January. It may well be that, in the first week of January, for many of those children, the best option will be remote learning or some scenario in which they are able to revise. We are cognisant of the fact that a range of schools might want to have, for example, a revision class. Those schools will want that freedom to manoeuvre, so we are giving that flexibility. Similarly, as Ms Armstrong mentioned, some year 11s will do GCSEs in June. Again, some flexibility will be given to schools in relation to that cohort for that four-week period. In most cases, much of this will be covered by remote learning. Schools may want to have an additional aspect. I should point out another

small variation, which is that, in the Dickson plan, year 10 in junior high schools is also counted as an exam year, so there will be some additional flexibility there.

Issues were raised about childcare, preschool and nurseries. Members identified the impact that some of the restrictions that we have put in place will have on a broader societal level — quite often, on young parents. It is clear that, even with the new variant, very young children are not, generally speaking, impacted to the same extent. Certainly, the clear medical position is one of being relaxed about provision being in place throughout.

I also take on board the position of special schools, whose pupils make up about 2% of the school population. School is important for many of those children, particularly those with autism, who need routine. Others depend on special schools for medical interventions. Often, families are highly dependent on that. Other parents will take the view that they want their child to be at home. Ultimately, that will be a decision for families. However, there will be availability, and if, moving forward, any additional measures can be taken to support that, they will be taken.

In relation to interventions, we will make it clear that the wearing of face coverings within schools will apply to lessons in all post-primary schools. That will apply for the January period, at least, and will be reviewed; indeed, all measures are under constant review.

Similarly, with regard to school transport, we have been working with EA on a range of measures. A particular issue is the level of compliance on wearing face coverings on school transport, so there will be spot checks. The EA will work with us to push up that compliance as much as possible. To some extent, there is a level of constraint with regard to the numbers on school transport, but there will be a dramatic impact, particularly during the four-week period, when, effectively, about one third of the school population will be taken out of the picture.

I appreciate that people raised a number of other points. We will try to get back to them.

**Mr Speaker:** As the amendment was tabled by the proposers of the motion, I call Ms Cara Hunter to conclude and make the winding-up speech on the motion and amendment. The Member will have 10 minutes.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Minister for being here and thank other Members for their contributions. I welcome the opportunity to contribute and make the winding-up speech in this crucial debate.

Before I move to other Members' comments, I want to say briefly that I, too, have received mass correspondence from the public on their concerns about the dire need for improved classroom safety measures and on the call for teachers and school staff to receive the vaccine sooner due to their constant, consistent, hands-on engagement with multiple pupils every day. We have raised that issue in previous weeks, and we want to see teachers included as a priority. Recently, I spoke to a 25-year-old teacher who said, "I love my job, but I would be lying if I said that I was not scared to go back to work".

To meet the needs and aspirations of young people, tougher, clearer safeguards are absolutely necessary and are urgently required. The principle of creating a safe working environment for our teachers and a safe educational environment for our students is absolutely paramount. It demands action.

As I have only 10 minutes in which to speak and many comments to contribute, I will move to comments from other Members. I welcome the general and widespread recognition expressed by many Members of the importance of safety in educational settings during the crisis. Mr McCrossan stated his concerns about the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the North and about how children could bring home the virus to their parents, grandparents and many loved ones. He also noted that Norma Foley had implemented additional measures in the South, such as mandatory masks. I share his concern about transport in the education sector and private operators. Recently, I spoke to a school bus driver who lives in Limavady in my constituency and recently caught COVID at work on the school bus. He had 53 children from mixed households on the bus, and, as a result, over 40 families had to self-isolate. I am keen to hear more from the Minister about what is being done by his Department to protect children and drivers.

Mr Newton praised the Minister for steps that he has taken so far and for his statement this morning. He also thanked teachers, school staff and NHS staff for their devotion to helping the public. I share his sentiments on that. However, he stated that the Minister was aware of the seriousness of the situation. I will be frank: I struggle to agree with that. On 21 December, in his statement to the Ad Hoc Committee, the

Minister stated, on the subject of mass testing, that he would begin to further explore it. That is deeply concerning because well-planned mass testing is necessary in order to have safe and secure educational settings.

Ms Brogan said that many questions remained unanswered, which is true. She emphasised her support and the need for support for vulnerable children, children with special needs and their families.

Mr Butler from the UUP made a valid point about the importance of mental health during this time. He said that Ministers' mental health was important too: I agree wholeheartedly. No Minister is perfect. We live in unprecedented and challenging times, and there is mass pressure on all Ministers. However, I feel that calling on the Minister of Education today is key and fundamental to seeking clarity on the real, tangible steps that will be taken to protect our constituents and their families.

Mr Lyttle mentioned his frustration at the lack of timely engagement that, he felt, the Minister had had with the Committee for Education and school leaders, making contingency planning somewhat difficult: I agree wholeheartedly. For schools to be a safe environment, organisation through effective communication with school leaders is vital. One teacher informed me that, "I get my updates through the news. I wish that the Department would engage with us more directly". That was a teacher from Claudy.

Mr Bradley said that school was necessary for pupils' development: I agree. School is fundamental to young people's well-being. However, I reiterate what Mr McCrossan said when he moved the motion: none of us wants to shut schools, but we simply recognise that, for them to reopen safely and securely, we must protect children, staff and their families.

### 1.00 pm

Moving on, Mr Colm Gildernew, who is also Chair of the Health Committee, rightly mentioned the valid point of the new COVID variant and the scientific evidence of increased transmission in young people and the difficulties that that presents in school settings. He stated that he feels that there have been times when the Department has been slow to act. I echo that sentiment. Parents are genuinely afraid to send their kids to school in this time of uncertainty, and they seek leadership and enhanced communication from the Department.

Mr Humphrey echoed that cross-Department collaboration is key in the pandemic: I agree.

He also stated that Members can be too critical of Ministers and that they have tough decisions to make. That is true but is somewhat of an unfair statement. It is a fundamental aspect of our role as MLAs to scrutinise and hold Ministers to account.

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

**Ms Hunter:** Yes.

**Mr Carroll:** On her last point, would the Member agree that it is not as if the Minister did not have any sight that the problems would arise? He was warned by the Health Minister several weeks ago that schools should not return to business as usual.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, it is a key issue that many people have echoed to me as well through my constituency office. It is key that we have long contingency plans to continually assess what will happen in the next couple of weeks and months.

Going back to Mr Humphrey's point, it is important that we hold our Ministers to account.

Ms Flynn started by saying that clarity was urgent and necessary. She reiterated that mental health was important during the pandemic and stated that children from deprived areas were suffering greatly from increased anxiety. I also find that worrying. Minister, we have known since the start of the pandemic that anxiety in young people of school age is a huge issue, and I welcome your comments about the £5 million investment. I would like to hear more about that as well.

Mr McNulty reiterated his fear for young children and the distress that they may find when taking the transfer test. I agree with that wholeheartedly.

Mr Nesbitt voiced his concerns about the nature of the debate today: was it simply an opportunity to lambast the Minister? He also sought further clarity on contingency plans and said that we must all work together during this difficult time. I agree.

Mr O'Dowd said that he would like the Minister to plan for if schools were to close for a significant period.

Ms Armstrong reiterated the point of mental health being impacted by the lack of decisions by the Department. She also stated that we must apologise to teachers. I absolutely agree

on that, as will many Members. Teachers and principals are fundamentally overwhelmed. The lack of answers and time to prepare causes undeniable anxieties.

Mr McGrath mentioned the transport issues again. They are a massive issue. He asked for clarity on children with special needs in mainstream schools.

Ms Woods stated that 45% of young people did not feel safe in their workplace, school or college and called for a youth conference, which is a fantastic idea, to boost engagement with the public.

Lastly, Mr Carroll emphasised his frustrations, stating that he was worried about workers across schools and would like to have seen the Minister act sooner.

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

**Ms Hunter:** Yes.

**Mr McCrossan:** Does the Member agree that it is entirely regrettable that we have had the recall petition today, we have heard the Minister — we have listened to him for 20 minutes — and we are still no clearer on any detail about what mitigations, protections or resources he is specifically putting in place to protect kids, classroom assistants, teachers, school staff and bus drivers? He still has not confirmed whether he will publish the advice that he has received.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree: it is regrettable. Clarity is absolutely necessary and, above all things, gives people crucial time to plan ahead.

To close, I thank Members for their contributions and hope that I have been able to fit them all in. Lastly, Minister, just briefly, the number of coronavirus positive tests is really staggering and is increasing greatly this week, as you mentioned. I believe that, on the 30th, there were 2,341 cases. It is a really dangerous, serious time, as you have acknowledged. With schools due to return shortly, teachers, simply by doing their job, undoubtedly increase their odds of being a victim of the virus. As I draw my remarks to a close, we ask you to note the concerns voiced today in the Chamber and for your acknowledgment of the mass increases of COVID-19 cases and the challenges that they present. We ask that you listen to the needs of the public and their worries and treat health and safety with the utmost priority. I hope that Members will support the motion.

*Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes with concern reports that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) may have recommended school closures; is deeply concerned by the number of deaths from COVID-19; recognises the concerns of teachers, pupils and parents; calls for urgent clarity from the Minister of Education on what work has been undertaken with the Department of Health on protecting schoolchildren, teachers, parents and the wider public from the spread of COVID-19; and further calls on the Minister of Education to outline the medical and scientific advice his Department has received and to explain whether he will consider additional mitigations and protections, while welcoming the announcement today by the Minister detailing a phased return to schools and seeking assurances from the Minister on the work his Department will now undertake to ensure the safety of staff and pupils during the remainder of the pandemic.*

## Adjournment

**Mr Speaker:** Item 3 on the Order Paper is the Adjournment. A happy new year to all Members and to all our staff. Thank you very much.

*Adjourned at 1.05 pm.*

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