

F/T: 0300 244 4000
E: dfmcse@gov.scot

Seamus Searson
General Secretary
Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association

By email: SeamusS@ssta.org.uk

Our ref: A31212786

15 December 2020

Dear Seamus

Thank you for your email of 10 December enclosing a copy of your letter to Local Authority Chief Executives, setting out your views on education and keeping staff and pupils safe in the run up to Christmas. This was covered in some detail at our meeting on 9 December but it may be helpful if I set out again the reasons behind my decision not to intervene to change the locally-determined school holiday dates.

The decision was taken after thorough consideration of the views expressed by education partners, including union representatives, as well as evidence provided by the COVID-19 Advisory sub-group on Education and Children's Issues.

Their [advisory note on school holidays](#) offered crucial context in reaching the decision. That advisory note stressed that this was a finely balanced decision and highlighted a range of determining factors including, but not limited to:

- The absence of any evidence that schools and ELC settings are driving transmission
- A lack of evidence as to whether social mixing would be increased or decreased during a period of closure of school buildings with on-line learning, alongside recognition of the considerable efforts made by schools and ELC settings to prevent and mitigate COVID-related harms. The group were not aware of any evidence that closing schools for a longer period over Christmas would reduce social mixing
- Issues of equity and protecting the health, wellbeing and safety of vulnerable children and those living in poverty.

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I have reflected on our discussion last week and whether or not remote learning could be used flexibly in the lead up to the Christmas holidays. However, based on the above, I have not changed my original decision, and it is my view that schools should remain open as planned.

The context is something I know we are all aware of, but I think it is important to highlight again that this is also underpinned by the Scottish Government's existing policy regarding any move by an education authority to remote learning, as set out in the [guidance on reducing risks in schools](#), which has been jointly developed with local government and partners.

This guidance recognises that there may be circumstances in which, based on clear evidence and public health considerations, or other relevant factors, specific schools require either to close, or to implement remote learning for some children and young people for a defined period of time. All such decisions will continue to be made by local incident management teams, working in partnership with, and on the independent advice of, local Directors of Public Health, who take full account of school safety and wider public health considerations in line with their statutory duties. Similar decisions may require to be taken by local authorities, in conjunction with schools, where staffing constraints (e.g. due to self-isolation or shielding) or other matters make such a move unavoidable.

Since schools returned in August, we know that several have successfully implemented remote learning for specific cohorts, following advice from local public health teams. Teachers have used a range of online solutions, including those provided through national arrangements including Glow, to ensure that any disruption to learning is minimised. I am aware that through their efforts and dedication teachers have significantly improved the online offer for remote learning where it is required.

It is also important to acknowledge the detailed protection measures set out in our COVID-19 Strategic Framework, which are specifically designed to reduce community transmission and protect our schools. Having the protection levels in place has already contributed to our ability to reduce transmission in the community. I believe this deliberate community-wide strategy by the Government to suppress the virus is vital in protecting our schools from closure. A European Commission communication '[Staying safe from COVID-19 during winter](#)' from 2 December sets out a number of non-binding considerations for member states. However we are now seeing the benefit of our protection levels approach in the reduction in prevalence of the virus.

That said, I recognise and reflected in my decision, the advisory sub-group condition that school staff be enabled to have a proper break over the festive period. I agree that it is imperative. I would want to assure you of my determination to ensure this is realised. Public Health Scotland continues to work with local Health Protection Teams and Directors of Education towards finalising the school contract tracing arrangements, to minimise the impact on staff over the festive period.

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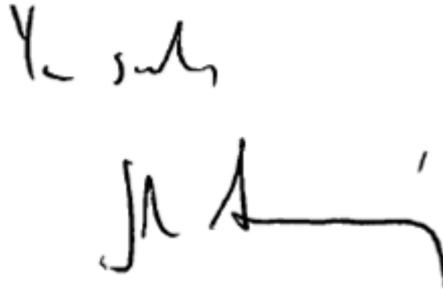


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I remain very grateful to teachers, school leaders and other education staff for their professionalism and dedication to support our children and young people throughout the pandemic. It is vital that school staff are able to get a much deserved break at Christmas and New Year and I am committed to ensuring that the arrangements are properly in place to enable that to be the case.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Swinney', written in a cursive style.

JOHN SWINNEY

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