

Phased return of pupils to start in March

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Pre-school, nursery and primary school pupils in P1 to P3 will return to full-time face-to-face teaching from 8 March 2021.



Education Minister, Peter Weir also said that students in years 12 to 14, who will be awarded qualifications this summer will return to full time face-to-face teaching with effect from 22 March 2021.

To enable the return of years 12 to 14, remote learning will resume for pre-school/nursery children and pupils in P1 to 3 for the week beginning 22 March until the start of the Easter holidays.

Pre-school, nursery and primary school pupils in P1 to P3 will then return to full-time face-to-face teaching after the Easter holidays along with years 12-14.

The Minister said: **“I have always sought to be guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognising the priority the Executive has placed on education, and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term, but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.**

“Today the Executive has agreed to a phased return focusing, in the first instance, on the early years in pre-school and primary school which are crucial for children’s development. Those year groups engaged in learning for key qualifications (i.e. years 12 to 14) must also be prioritised in our return planning. It is vital that they have every opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training.”

Concluding Peter Weir said his main objective was a full return of all pupils to school as soon as practicably possible after the Easter break but this had to be balanced against the public health position.

He said: **“The clear feedback from schools, unions, parents and pupils has been that once a decision is taken to return to school, there should be no further periods of wholesale remote learning. However, I recognise that it may be necessary in limited cases.**

“All settings will be reminded of the need for stringent adherence to good practice and additional signage will be provided to all schools to encourage people to comply with public health messaging.

“It is likely that schools will require additional resources to manage these different stages of pupils returning and my officials will work to identify what is required, including the use of substitute teachers if needed.”

In relation to the provision of youth services, the Minister said he would bring a further paper to the Executive soon to provide clarity to the service.

Department of Education officials will engage with practitioners and unions over the next week to discuss and prepare for the phased return.