

Mr Peter Weir
Education Minister
Room 207
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
BT4 3XX



4 August 2020

Dear Minister

I write on behalf of The NIC-ICTU Education Group which is made up of teaching and support staff unions organising in the education sectors. It meets regularly to examine and a common strategic approach to policy issues affecting teaching and support staff unions, excepting bargaining matters such as pay. Maxine Murphy-Higgins (NASUWT) is currently the Chair of the ETUG.

ETUG are concerned by the pressure put on individual schools and its leaders in relation to pupils returning to classrooms. Of particular concern, there seems to be little guidance or direction given in relation to meal provision, cleaning and transport. The current guidance sets out that Principals should deal with this on a school-by-school basis, however this is not sufficient and this combined with a letter from the Minister advising that there was no further money to be allocated is very concerning.

Schools need to be given direction in these areas and the services need to be protected. Our meal provision is often the only hot meal a child could get in a day and this needs to be delivered. Also, cleaning in this pandemic is the one way that we can prevent the spread of the virus, while transport is key to getting some especially vulnerable children to school.

Yes, we do expect that all the relevant precautions will be taken around social distancing and PPE, but clear direction needs to be given.

We are further concerned that many of our support members have not been advised when they should return to school. We know that some schools have made the decision not have school meals until September without setting out when they will recommence. Classroom assistants have not been given any information as to when they should return even though many schools will have pupils back by 24th August.

ETUG are apprehensive with the general issue of childcare and how affected members will be able to attend work. We appreciate this is not confined to Education but it is very concerning for our members in all unions, who represent support staff as well as teachers. There are existing restrictions on the child care providers, plus additional childcare will also be required. This circle cannot be squared easily.

We are therefore calling on the government to give clear direction to schools in relation to meal provision, cleaning and transport. Funds must be provided to keep all our workers and children safe.

We look forward to your response.

Maxine Murphy-Higgins
Chair NIC-ICTU Education Trade Union Group

*CC: Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary, DENI
Chris Lyttle, Chair NI Assembly Education Committee
Sharon O'Connor, Chairperson Education Authority NI
Sara Long, Chief Executive Education Authority NI*