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VM/AP

21 October 2020

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, MSP
Scottish Parliament
EDINBURGH
EH99 1SP

Dear First Minister

As Joint Leaders of East Dunbartonshire Council, we wish to make the strongest representation to you on the importance of keeping our schools open to prevent further harm and disadvantage to our children and young people.

It is critical that schools remain open – blended/digital learning cannot and should not replace the wider benefits of face-to-face teaching and learning.

There requires to be a clear case to close schools again as the impact on children and families is high if schools were to close for an extended period of time.

There would require to be clear evidence of transmission within schools and early years' centres. Within East Dunbartonshire, a risk assessment is carried out when there is a positive case. Following Public Health Scotland Guidance, this is done by the school, supported by officers from Education and Environmental Health. There have been **no** cases in East Dunbartonshire, where there has been transmission within the school or nursery.

This Council has implemented a robust risk assessment. This includes the extensive provision of hand sanitiser in all establishments, enhanced cleaning including day cleaners and physical distancing is implemented in accordance with the Scottish Government Guidance. All schools have implemented staggered entry and breaks as an additional mitigation measure.

These measures have enabled children to engage in high quality learning in all schools and early years' centres.

The impact of a further extended school closure would be significant in terms of attainment, particularly for those young people in the Senior Phase, who are studying for National Qualifications. The announcement that there will be no examination for National 5 requires pupils to undertake assessments. These must be done within a school environment to ensure the integrity of the qualifications is maintained. Pupils in S5 and S6, who were most impacted last session due to the cancellation of the exam diet, need this time in school to study for the qualifications next year. This term is a critical time when studying for national qualifications.

Closing the attainment gap has been a key priority and the closure of schools had a significant impact on children affected by poverty. Their ability to engage in digital learning was less than in more affluent areas. This was not only due to the lack of a digital device but many did not have suitable conditions to engage in home learning.

There is a programme in place in all schools to address learning loss and to develop digital learning approaches. If a class or child is required to self-isolate then home learning is provided often using digital learning. This is for the short time that self-isolation is required but a longer term closure of schools would impact significantly on children's attainment as it cannot replace face to face teaching and the engagement in learning with others in a classroom.

The Impact Assessment on the closure of schools showed there was a bigger impact on women, as they were required to undertake the childcare for children who were not attending school or nursery. It is also the case that the lockdown had a negative impact on children affected by poverty. The support provided by schools in terms of health and wellbeing is significant and this is an important factor that requires to be taken into account in any decision to close schools.

The risks of closing schools for an extended period of time needs to be weighed against schools remaining open with the required mitigation measures to make our schools as safe as possible for children and staff.

We believe that the mitigation measures are in place to keep our schools open.

We believe that our schools must be kept open to ensure that the attainment gap does not widen further, that our pupils studying for National 5 are allowed to do so, that our Higher and Advanced Higher exams are not put at risk and that the burden of education is not placed on our parents.

Yours sincerely



.....
Councillor Andrew Polson
Joint Leader of the Council



.....
Councillor Vaughan Moody
Joint Leader of the Council

Copy To:

- John Swinney, MSP - Depute First Minister
- Willie Rennie, MSP
- Ruth Davidson, MSP
- Richard Leonard, MSP
- Patrick Harvie, MSP
- Cllr Alison Evison, COSLA President
- Cllr Stephen McCabe - COSLA Children & Young People Spokesperson

Leas Phrìomh Mhinistear agus Rùnaire a' Chaibineit
airson Foghlam agus Sgìlean
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for
Education and Skills



Scottish Government
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Councillors Andrew Polson and Vaughan Moody
Joint Leaders, Education and Skills Committee
East Dunbartonshire Council

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23 October 2020

Dear Cllr Polson and Cllr Moody

Thank you for your letter to the First Minister dated 21 October, setting out your views on the importance of in-school learning for pupils in East Dunbartonshire. I entirely recognise the impacts previous, necessary school closures in March had on our children and young people. It is a priority of mine and of this Government to do all that we can to ensure the virus does not prevent them receiving the best start in life.

Through strong partnership working between local and central Government and our partners, we have achieved our collective priority of a successful return to school, and all our learning establishments, from August. That commitment remains and I know you are as steadfast as I am to ensure schools are safe, open and welcoming wherever possible in the difficult months ahead. I am heartened to read in detail about all your Council has done to ensure children and young people enjoy their educational and wellbeing benefits to best effect. The measures we have put in place in wider society will help protect that. By keeping the virus under control in our communities, we significantly reduce the likelihood of it entering our schools.

Earlier today the First Minister published Scotland's Strategic Framework setting out how we will work to suppress the virus, reflect on the decisions we will need to make, and the balance we will have to achieve in tackling the four harms we know the virus causes.

Over the course of the past seven months schools and local authorities across Scotland have worked hard to deliver online/distance learning successfully where required. I am confident that, in the event of local outbreaks, arrangements are in place for localised remote learning for individuals or groups. I am also pleased with the way that Education Scotland has worked with key partners to develop a shared national offer for schools to draw on.

Tha Ministearan na h-Alba, an luchd-comhairleachaidh sònraichte agus an Rùnaire
Maireannach fo chumhachan Achd Coiteachaidh (Alba) 2016. Faicibh www.lobbying.scot

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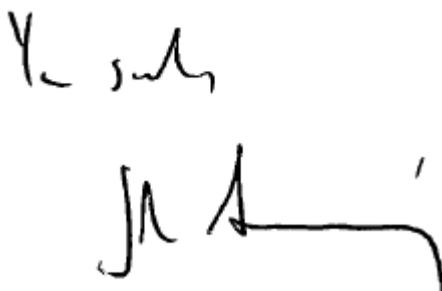


This offer coordinates and works alongside local contingency plans for learning by schools, teachers and Local Authorities.

Furthermore, our current school guidance has been developed by the Covid-19 Education Recovery Group (ERG), which I chair jointly the COSLA spokesperson for Children and Young People, Cllr Stephen McCabe. This sets out clearly the protective measures that should be in place, and where outbreaks and incidents do occur, Test and Protect and local Incident Management Teams are working to disrupt chains of transmission rapidly.

The evidence we have to date suggests these arrangements are working well. In view of the new Strategic Framework and to reflect other advice and evidence, which has been published recently, the schools guidance is currently being updated and will be published before the end of the month.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, I can assure you that we are committed to working with local authorities and agencies to prioritise keeping schools open. This inevitably involves strengthening protection measures where necessary, and ensuring effective plans are in place should any move from full time in-school learning be required. I am grateful for both your support in this matter.



JOHN SWINNEY

Tha Ministearan na h-Alba, an luchd-comhairleachaidh sònraichte agus an Rùnaire Maireannach fo chumhachan Achd Coiteachaidh (Alba) 2016. Faicibh www.lobbying.scot

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