

Kirsty Williams AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-1065
Ein cyf/Our ref KW/06244/20
Janet Finch-Saunders MS
Member of the Senedd
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2 November 2020

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the Petitions Committee, seeking views on the issues raised in Petition P-05-1065, regarding opening schools for year 11 pupils from 2nd November, before your formal consideration.

When I announced that schools would re-open for all learners from 14 September I was clear that children and young people had already lost 6 months of face-to-face learning, and that any future disruption to their education needs to be kept to a minimum. As a Government we have said repeatedly that children would be our top priority if further restrictions are needed, and that education must continue. However, as the virus has taken hold we recognise a firebreak is essential if we are to slow the R rate down and so difficult decisions have had to be made. Of course I want to see all schools and colleges open to all learners, but we have a small window of opportunity to act. A “fire-break” must be a swift and short-term period of simple but extreme restrictions across the whole of Wales to significantly reduce the prevalence of the virus in Wales. The First Minister and I remain committed to our top priority; to keep schools open for as long as possible, so I assure you decisions have not been taken lightly.

We cannot ignore the advice of SAGE in the TAC report and their recommendation that a package of intervention is needed to prevent an exponential rise in cases, and that single interventions are unlikely to be able to reduce incidence. Equally, we note the advice from SAGE that the role of children in transmission is limited. Both opening and closing schools will impact on community transmission (e.g. by changing the activities of a large number of adults), that is why we have taken the balanced decision that we have.

Given the need for a fire break, and in balancing the scientific and medical advice, we have decided that those in primary school, special schools and year 7 and 8 pupils, along with

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

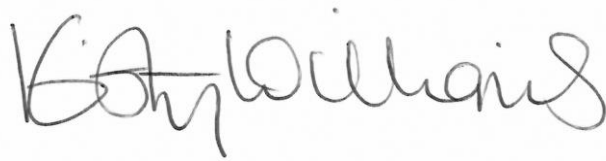
those sitting exams during that week, will receive face-to-face learning. Those learners in year 9 -13 will not miss out on their education during the second week of the fire break, they will continue to receive their education but this will be done through blended learning. These year groups have the ability to undertake self-directed learning, and they will be supported for the week by their teachers who will be in the classroom. For older learners, the online learning over the week will also provide a dedicated catch-up time to reflect on learning so far, ahead of the rest of the year. As older learners are also more likely to be mixing socially outside of school, for this one week they need to stay at home to support the national effort.

I do however fully appreciate these are extremely difficult times, and that learners and their families will be anxious about their futures, especially following the learning that has been lost in the summer term and during self-isolation periods.

I have stressed how vital it is that the impact of the firebreak on education will last for just one week. The firebreak is for the shortest period we can make it, but along with all other sectors, we have to play our part for it be sharp and deep and have maximum impact on the virus. Restricting the numbers of pupils in schools temporarily is our contribution to this wider, national effort. However, we will do everything we can to maximise education, minimise disruption and keep Wales learning. Schools have learnt lessons from the first lockdown, and able to put arrangements in place in case of disrupted learning.

We have been clear that to be successful we need everyone's help. Here in Wales, this is the moment to come together; to play our part in a common endeavour to once again protect the NHS and save lives. This will not be easy but we will do it together.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams'.

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