



8 January 2021

Dear Headteacher

Wishing you a better new year in the hope you found some time to rest during the break.

Inevitably, and as I noted in my letter to you on 16 December, we have seen a difficult start to 2021 with Wales on alert level 4, and schools and colleges moving to remote learning, due to increased transmission of the new COVID-19 strain.

The First Minister will confirm today that we will bring the decision-making on schools and colleges into line with the Welsh Government's three-week review timetable of 29 January. This means that students will continue to learn remotely and vulnerable children and children of critical workers will have access to on-site provision along with learners undertaking essential exams and assessments, until then.

At that point, unless the rates of community transmission in Wales reduce significantly by 29 January, most students in schools and colleges will continue working remotely until the February half term.

I want to stress – guided by the TAG report, to be published ahead of the First Minister's announcement – that this is not a simple binary choice between closing schools now and reopening them in February. The TAG report is clear on education's contribution to our efforts to deal with this, not because schools are now more unsafe or pose a higher risk for teachers and children.

We are taking this action because the new variant is far more infectious and is leading to increased numbers of people falling ill and being hospitalised.

We will use the coming weeks to work with local authorities, unions and headteachers to plan for the future. We want to work together creatively to look at all the possibilities for a phased, and safe, return of some pupils during this period. We have achieved this in every new term since the summer and that's down to our collective mission to prioritise our children's growth, learning and well-being.

Colleagues will know that the new variant does not mean schools have suddenly become unsafe. They do not pose an increased risk to teachers or students.

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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.

However, keeping schools open does encourage children and adults to mix – inside and outside the school gates – at a time when cases of coronavirus are high in the community and we have a very infectious strain spreading quickly.

Our invitation to you is to keep working with us so we can use this time to tackle instances of digital exclusion, undertake fresh risk assessments and renew guidance, in line with issues raised by the workforce.

Schools and colleges will also be preparing to implement the offer of serial testing, to help minimise the number of learners and staff who have to self-isolate as contacts of positive COVID cases.

Doing all this will ensure that we can plan for the return of selected groups of students, particularly those at key points in their learning, to return to on-site provision ahead of a full return.

Qualifications Wales have also announced the cancellation of the spring internal assessment window (due between 22 February and 23 April) for GCSE, AS and A levels. Revised assessment arrangements for the award of these qualifications in summer 2021 will be put in place shortly.

I know that this is a difficult time for all at present, but I will continue to keep you informed.

Yours sincerely

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

Kirsty Williams AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education