

Letter to Andy Gray, Ian Perrie and Alison Dickie

3 December 2020

Dear Andy, Ian, and Alison

I am writing to you in relation to the Deputy First Minister's decision, communicated earlier today to the Education and Skills Committee of the Scottish Parliament, not to make any change to the dates of the school holidays.

As you will be well aware, Edinburgh's school holidays are due to begin on 22nd December. The EIS is *not* asking for the date of the holiday to be changed. We are, however, asking that the 21st and 22nd of December become remote learning days. The reasons for this are as follows:

All school staff have been working to the absolute limit in the most stressful circumstances that most of us have ever experienced. They have been giving of their utmost to keep children safe, to support learning, and to serve their local communities. The strains have been, and continue to be, tremendous. Stress levels are through the roof, and morale is plummeting. For many, the prospect of being able to spend the Christmas holidays with loved ones is the only thing that is keeping them going (that this is a highly significant issue for people is seen in the fact that the four nations have all agreed to relax covid-related regulations over the Christmas period, despite acknowledging the consequences that this will have). I ask you to contemplate the impact it will have on staff if they have to self-isolate over the Christmas period because, during those last two days, they were identified as a contact from a positive case in school.

Scottish government advice is explicit that, before forming a "Christmas bubble" people should do all they can to limit interactions, so as to minimise transmission risks and protect loved ones. This is impossible for people who work in schools - the crowded nature of Edinburgh schools is a matter of record, and for many, especially in special schools, early years and other settings, it is recognised that social distancing is impossible. Were schools to stay physically open until 22nd December, rather than moving to remote learning, many staff will be forced to choose between putting their loved ones at risk, or not taking advantage of the opportunity to see vulnerable family members. This is not a choice anyone should be forced to make when an alternative is available.

The Deputy First Minister made explicit that there must be no impact on much needed staff holidays, to quote his letter:

One issue where there is broad consensus is around the need for school staff to have their planned holidays without interruption due to the need to engage in contact tracing. We also want to avoid families being disturbed on or around Christmas day due to any outbreaks which may involve a school prior to the start of the holiday period. In considering local arrangements, it will be vitally important that every effort is made to ensure that senior leadership teams and school staff get a proper

break, and that the likelihood of staff being required to support contact tracing activities over the holiday period is minimised.

The EIS would urge CEC to do all it can to ensure that responsibility for contact tracing is moved entirely away from school leadership teams - something that should apply at all times, and not just over Christmas. However, I would draw your attention to the highlighted passage above. It is not just school staff who will be impacted by the risks of being identified as a contact due to an outbreak at the end of term - many Edinburgh families will find their Christmases ruined if there is a positive case in the school in the last couple of days. Removing the need for school leaders to be involved in contact tracing is a necessary, but not sufficient step. Moving to remote learning for the Monday and Tuesday would lessen the chances of disruption.

We do recognise the implications of making this change, but we strongly believe that the benefits outweigh the costs. Frankly, many Edinburgh parents have already declared their intention to keep their children home on 21st and 22nd, for precisely the reasons we have outlined around protecting vulnerable family members. Whilst there will be a smaller group of families for whom the shift to home learning for those two days will have a significant impact, there should be time over the next couple of weeks to make provision to offer appropriate support, whilst giving other families time to make necessary arrangements.

There has been much rhetoric in the last few months about valuing the contribution of school staff. There are many who have, today, been left feeling that the rhetoric is just that - empty words that show no real understanding or compassion for those working in schools. I have already received a number of messages from EIS members who have been shocked, saddened and angered by the decision of the DFM, and the explanations given by him and others. This is a chance for the City of Edinburgh Council to show that it does listen to and value its school staff, recognises all they have done, all that they continue to do, and to make a change that would significantly improve the morale of employees, as well as protecting their health and wellbeing.

I look forward to hearing your views.

Kind regards

Alison

Alison Murphy
Local Association Secretary
Edinburgh Local Association
EIS
46 Moray Place
Edinburgh
EH3 6BH

Mobile: 07948 280 906
<http://www.eis.org.uk/edinburgh/>
Twitter: @EdinburghEIS

Domestic abuse an issue? Go to <https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/Contact-us> for help.