

From mountain to sea

Changes to Schools and Schooling in 2020 because of the Coronavirus Epidemic

Some Frequently Asked Questions

What are the implications of the changes in Health and Safety in school?

Over the Summer months, Scottish Government produced general guidance for local authorities on how to re-open schools safely. The process of publishing more detailed stage and subject specific guidance is still on-going, and on receipt of these, schools are required to revisit their working practices and procedures.

Schools undertook extensive risk assessment in the preparation for pupils returning in August. As a result, new rules and routines have had to be – and continue to be – introduced in all establishments. No two schools are the same, however, so each school's approach must be tailored to fit its own context.

Creating and then implementing all this new guidance has been necessary to ensure the health and safety of young people and school staff. It has been a major challenge and has resulted in a major change to established working patterns. Significant time is now being spent explaining and reinforcing the guidance and because safety has been prioritised, some of the tasks which were routinely completed by staff before the pandemic are not being done so often or so quickly as before.

From the outside, it may look as if schools are as they always were - but they are not. School life has changed significantly. Parents may be aware that queries are not dealt with so promptly, that members of leadership teams are not available to take calls, or that information takes longer to reach home, but we would ask for patience, as delays are often caused by the fact that so much time is now being diverted into supervision and the maintenance of good health and safety, and schools *will* still get back to parents as soon as they can.

Why can't I go into my child's school?

All Aberdeenshire schools are following Scottish Government guidance to ensure the safety of pupils and staff in schools. They are also acutely aware of the need to reduce movement between different groups of people and the need to ensure that every possible measure is in place to try to prevent infection entering schools. Because of this, to protect the safety of pupils and staff, many schools are unable to allow parents to access school buildings.

Where there is need for a parent to engage with the school because, for example, a child has forgotten to take something important into school, or there is some emergency situation at home, the school will do what it can to help. In these cases, parents should telephone the school to explain the problem and the school will then explain how that

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can be overcome. The most important thing to remember is that parents should not appear at school unannounced because in such cases, it is likely that they will not be able to access the building.

Why can't my school answer some of my questions?

Although young people are back in school, Covid 19 is still an ever-present threat in our communities, and like everywhere else, schools have had to change and adapt. The certainty which we for so long have taken for granted has now gone and everyone in the country is having to cope with changing rules, and restrictions which differ day to day, week to week. With this as the backdrop to school life, it is difficult for Head Teachers to make decisions too far ahead. The focus for now will be to try to ensure that young people are supported to learn and achieve in a safe and healthy environment.

When will Parent Evenings return?

At present parents, and other non-essential school personnel, are not allowed to enter school buildings. As a result, therefore, schools are unable to hold Parents Evenings. The position as regards Parent Evenings will be reviewed in November. If the situation around Covid 19 improves significantly, restrictions may be eased and should this happen, individual schools will look at how best they can manage to accommodate parent meetings. These may, however, look different in each school and may differ in Primary and Secondary settings.

Parents should be aware that there may not be a full return to face to face meetings. Schools will, however, be mindful of the need to share information about pupils' progress with parents and will look at ways of managing this. This may mean Parents Evenings being replaced and we will look at ways of managing this via collegiate dialogue at school level and advise parents accordingly in due course.

How has the Curriculum and Learning and Teaching been affected by the changes?

We are continuing to cover all aspects of the curriculum in classes as best we can, but there are some activities – often practical activities which pose some challenges. Guidance from Scottish Government has suggested that where possible schools should look to use outdoor spaces to deliver some aspects of the curriculum and schools are looking for ways to do this. Where an activity is heavily dependent on shared specialised equipment, teachers must consider how – or if – that can be used safely, and risk assess activities accordingly. Everywhere in schools, there is a huge emphasis on cleaning, and regular hand washing or hand sanitising is now part of the routine in all schools.

Why is less homework being set just now?

During normal times at school, homework is an integral part of the school week. Currently, however, homework presents schools with some challenges. Movement of equipment and resources between home and school has to be restricted because of

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concerns about infection. Furthermore, when written work is submitted by pupils in jotters, or on paper, the rules say that it must be quarantined for 72 hours before it is marked, a delay which could be counter-productive for many young people. Schools could choose to set homework on-line and ask for work to be submitted in the same way, but this is only feasible where they are certain that all pupils can access such tasks. We are currently in what the Scottish Government has dubbed the Recovery Phase. In this phase, the focus has been on Health and Wellbeing, Literacy and Numeracy and homework has been less of a priority. Schools will, however, soon be considering how to resume homework safely and will communicate with parents as necessary to explain how this will be managed.

Secondary school specific FAQs

How are practical subjects in secondary schools affected by the restrictions put in place because of coronavirus?

Many of the subjects pupils study in school involve a significant degree of practical work – Art, Music, Drama, Home Economics, PE, Technical subjects, Business subjects and Sciences have very significant practical elements, but there is also practical work built into other courses. Guidance from Scottish Government, through Education Scotland, and from agencies like Scottish Schools Education Research Centre (SSERC) has been – or is being created – for schools to use in their planning, but there is no one size fits all approach. Factors like school rolls, school buildings, staffing levels, timetable design and the availability of resources differ from school to school and all affect what can and cannot be done.

Where a subject is resource and equipment dependent, there are rules about the sharing of equipment and the cleaning protocols that are required to ensure pupil and staff safety. This may mean that pupils can do less hands-on work and that they must learn from watching demonstrations rather than by doing the activities themselves. Where pupils are getting hands-on experience there are more frequent cleaning protocols to be worked in to teaching time and depending on period lengths, this can be prohibitive.

Just as there are restrictions applied to facilities like public gyms and swimming pools, there are restrictions on what can and cannot be done in PE classes. PE classes are mainly, if not wholly, happening out of doors, even in poor weather, and changing facilities are an issue for many schools given that changing rooms are generally quite small and often windowless. It is because of this that the guidance schools received said that pupils should come to school dressed in PE kit. Some schools have the accommodation to be able to create changing areas which satisfy the safety considerations, but in some schools, pressures on teaching space will not allow this.

Home Economics lessons provide another set of challenges because the design of most school kitchens makes any physical distancing very difficult and some equipment

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inevitably must be shared. Pupils are encouraged to observe physical distancing rules, but teaching staff *must* maintain physical distancing as much as possible. In small kitchens, this is very difficult, and Head Teachers are mindful that they cannot risk the safety of staff. There are also additional cleaning routines which add significant time pressures. Solutions to these challenges are being sought – but as with everything in our “new normal” there are no easy answers.

At present, schools are looking for ways to ensure pupils can learn and develop practical skills, but this is not easy. Teachers are working with colleagues within their own school and from other schools locally and nationally to find solutions to these challenges, while awaiting the promised national guidance.

Why are senior phase pupils who opted for a college course not able to attend classes in college?

Colleges, like schools, had to close their doors to students when lockdown began. Like schools, they have had to do a huge amount of preparation, involving detailed risk assessment, to be able to reopen safely. The Guidance for reopening Colleges was only published at the beginning of September and it included the steps that were to be taken to permit school pupils to return to college link courses.

For now, NESCol, SRUC and Dundee and Angus College courses are being delivered to school pupils through on-line platforms and plans are being drawn up to start the process of on-site delivery for some courses. Although the picture varies college to college, broadly speaking, if a course has no significant practical element it may be delivered wholly or mainly on-line this session. For more practical courses, planning is underway to see how pupils might attend college for some lessons. Because of physical distancing rules which have to be imposed in colleges, as they cater largely for adults, pupils are unlikely to be permitted to attend college every week. This may mean that pupils are unable to complete full courses, but in lieu of the usual qualification a college certificate could be given.

Schools are doing all they can to ensure appropriate arrangements are in place for pupils with a college course in their timetable, but it may take time for final plans for these courses to be finalised.

What is happening with SQA Exams?

Last session, SQA exams did not take place and the submission of coursework was also affected by the closure of schools in late March. This session, Scottish Government and SQA are planning for a full exam diet in 2021. At the moment, extensive consultation is taking place with Local Authorities, Teaching Unions and members of the teaching profession more widely, to try to produce a workable plan for examinations in 2021, with contingencies in place in case there are further spikes in Covid 19 cases. There are a whole range of factors which will have to be considered:

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- The ability to teach full course content has already been affected by school closures and may be affected further if schools are subject to more local or national lockdowns.
- Health and Safety restrictions mean that some practical course content cannot be done at all, or can only be done in part.
- Physical distancing concerns mean that accommodating exams may be a challenge for some schools.
- The timetable for University admissions impacts on when exams need to be held and so there are limits on how late the exam diet can run.

The uncertainty surrounding SQA's plans is undoubtedly causing anxiety for young people, parents and of course teachers, but we must all wait for final decisions to be made and new guidance on assessment in general, and examinations in particular to be produced. In the meantime, staff in schools are trying to ensure key aspects and skills from each course are covered until revised guidance is made available. Their aim is to try to ensure pupils are encouraged to stay positive and have the best possible chance to achieve.

Which regular school events can I expect to happen during this school year?

School life mirrors life in the community and just as many community events have had to be cancelled because of Covid 19, school events are subject to the same rules and regulations. This means that as things stand, schools cannot plan to hold events like school concerts, fund-raising events and curricular information events. Even occasions like school parties and proms are under threat in their current form. If restrictions are eased, there may be a possibility of some of the more traditional school calendar events taking place, but as always, schools will keep you fully informed.

How can I help as a parent, in this current situation?

This is a time of huge uncertainty for everyone: no one has a guide book to help them chart their way through this pandemic. Our young people will emerge stronger and more resilience from this difficult time, if parents and staff work together. Please continue to support your school in any way you can, within present restrictions, supporting your Parent Council, or any other parent forums your school has in place, as best you can.