

STATES OF JERSEY



SCHOOL CLOSURES (P.163/2020): AMENDMENT

Lodged au Greffe on 10th December 2020
by Deputy K.G. Pamplin of St. Saviour

STATES GREFFE

SCHOOL CLOSURES (P.163/2020): AMENDMENT

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After the words “state-run schools” delete the words “from Monday 14th December” and after the words “state-run schools” insert the words –

“to all pupils in years 8 and above, with all Colleges to close on 11th December at the end of the school day and all secondary schools from year 8 upwards to close from 14th December at the end of the school day”.

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After the words “key-workers,” insert the words –

“and those children whose parents have no access to alternative childcare.”.

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Designate the existing paragraph as paragraph (a) and insert the following additional paragraphs –

- “(b) that any such provision under paragraph (a) takes into account the enhanced monitoring systems that are in place for vulnerable children;
- (c) to request the Minister for Education to ensure that all schools allow parents to keep their children at home based on their concerns for the risk of virus transmission and not classify such children as being absent without authorisation (as long as the child has access and support provided to continue their studies); and
- (d) to request the Minister for Education and the Minister for Children and Housing to ensure that the necessary resources are made available to children and young people to ensure their access to mental health assistance is not reduced.”.

DEPUTY K.G. PAMPLIN OF ST. SAVIOUR

Note: After this amendment, the proposition would read as follows –

THE STATES are asked to decide whether they are of opinion –

- (a) to request the Minister for Education to take the steps necessary to close Jersey’s state-run schools to all pupils in years 8 and above, with all Colleges to close on 11th December at the end of the school day and all secondary schools from year 8 upwards to close from 14th December at the end of the school day for the remainder of the current school term, with provision provided for vulnerable children, and the children of key-workers and those children whose

parents have no access to alternative childcare, as the Minister considers appropriate and practical;

(b) that any such provision under paragraph (a) takes into account the enhanced monitoring systems that are in place for vulnerable children;

(c) to request the Minister for Education to ensure that all schools allow parents to keep their children at home based on their concerns for the risk of virus transmission and not classify such children as being absent without authorisation (as long as the child has access and support provided to continue their studies); and

(d) to request the Minister for Education and the Minister for Children and Housing to ensure that the necessary resources are made available to children and young people to ensure their access to mental health assistance is not reduced.”.

REPORT

I present this amendment to the main proposition for a whole host of reasons. Mostly after consulting with teachers, parents, the Children's Commissioner and, most importantly, children.

Also, as much as I am firmly of the opinion that decisions must be made fast when dealing with the effects of dealing with a pandemic, shutting schools at this late stage has many knock-on consequences. Especially for all and mostly vulnerable children where school is safe place.

And because understandably and respectfully the Education Department and the Minister are working hard behind the scenes taking on all advice (including medical advice) they haven't had time to fully explain their position to us and will do I am sure during the debates that now will be taking place and I wanted to offer a helpful thoughtful comprise if members want to vote to close schools/colleges early.

The conclusion I have come to, based on taking on all views, is that there should be a safe gradual phased closing. This should be led by the expert advice and the heads of Education but as a suggestion if we do vote to close early then this should start with Colleges and 6 forms tomorrow at close of play. This will allow support and time to speak to students that that have what need for next week and the holiday period. Also, to help anyone with mental health support needs that are provided.

There is also the situation as highlighted by the email members will be aware of sent to all parents following concerns expressed by the States of Jersey Police of gatherings of young people in groups. It was great to see and important to stress that when asked to follow the distance rules they did so respectfully. An extra time period to get this message across while ensuring support to students is key

Then where possible for nursery, primary schools (where classes have 1 teacher, but some accepting they have more) and year 7 of secondary school stay open IF safe to do so for the last 8 days of this term. So, they will have one more day on Monday to complete their end of term in class work, but also have an extra day to say goodbye to their friends and teachers while being also prepared for last week of home-schooling, that they have the internet and tech support at home to do this and again provide any in-house mental health support via the schools counselling service. This last part is so important.

Reports from Mental Health support groups and professionals have said that a sudden cut-off from that support caused a great deal of anxiety to those children suddenly lost without that support. We must make sure that those children have that opportunity to have a final chat and also be offered advice on what support is out there before schools are closed till next year.

For those members who will remember, and those of us with young children know, the last few days of school in these younger ages are more festive related and watching films and they have all worked so hard to follow the rules and guidelines and for some will feel like they are being punished for a sudden close.

Then another concern, one expressed by the Children's Commissioner, is the issue of ensuring that the red-amber-green system is in place and fully able to step up. If anyone is unaware of this process, it's to ensure those vulnerable young people are in line of sight. Members will be aware of the MASH process and any other educational and support that the daily safety of teachers are trained to spot.

Then there is the sudden issue of a week or so childcare to put in place. This affects all parents of course and parents are also under pressures of keeping their jobs, by adapting to home working or if not able to how to they ensure their children have that adult supervision. Childcare support is stretched and expensive as we know but given the effects of the pandemic, parents' network of support (which a lot of the time is elderly grandparents) is lost. But worrying me are not just front-line working parents, but single parents who can't afford to suddenly stop working and could for the hard-working parents force them into a terrible position. Yes, key workers it sounds like will get that support again in school next week, but there are lot of single parents who won't be classed like that. There is no instant money support benefit to help these parents and could be forced into untenable choices or positions. We must lessen the impact as much as possible and allow parents to keep their children at school if they have no money or threat of loss of job or income. A couple of days will help, I hope.

This concerns me a lot.

Lastly for children who live with vulnerable parents, or for whatever reason will be in close contact with elderly family members, should be able to be fully supported with that decision to remove their children based on those risks. But talking to parents that rule or guidelines is not so clear and absences from school are counted and that burden of worry I think should be clear and removed.

This I hope members will see is a compromise that will at least help the Education Minister and her Department given the sudden States meeting and IF closing schools is voted for. The mental health impacts on all children because of this year, like everyone's else's Mental Health fall out, worries me a lot. I have said it so many times we need to put more in place next year above what we are currently doing to support Mental Health Charities and professionals be on hand for everyone but most of all children who will go through a range of emotions. Everyone is trying the hardest and doing what they think is right to the protection and wellbeing of all. I pay tribute to the unknown faces and people on the working all hours on this on all of our behalf and the proposer of the main proposition as well.

Finally, I pay tribute to every school or place that has cared for children this year. The efforts of everyone, from the cleaners, caretakers, teachers, support staff, heads and parents. It cannot be understated enough that these fine examples of our island society have been pushed, stretched under resourced and under paid for too long, much like are care workers and others in our health services.

Frankly we shouldn't be in this position, I'm furious at the place we find ourselves in. There is a lot of emotions around right now. And there must be accountability for this but for now we must channel our thoughts and minds into helping being proactive and helpful which I think this amendment offers if members vote for it and the early closure of schools today in the best interests of all Islanders.

Financial and manpower implications

It is hard to put a figure on this, but every penny should be made available to the Education and Children's Ministers to put in place all I have proposed but especially the mental health support of children