

Peter Weir MLA
Minister of Education
Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgill
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

14 April 2021

Dear Minister

I am writing on behalf of the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM), the UK's professional body for musicians, regarding the current rules in Northern Ireland for singing and playing wind or brass instruments on school premises.

We previously wrote to your Department on 07 July regarding private music tuition and were grateful for your response on 15 September, which helped us to provide the most up to date information for our members. However, I am now writing in relation to the letter you sent to schools on 01 April, which states:

"On CMO and Public Health Agency advice, no indoor singing or playing of wind or brass instruments should take place on school premises. Schools should note that this applies to pupils undertaking these activities either individually or as part of a group. These activities are permitted in outdoor settings where pupils remain socially distanced. This will be kept under review."

We understand fully that the safety, health and wellbeing of everyone is of paramount importance and the Public Health Agency has raised concerns about the "Kent variant". However, we have been contacted by a number of members who are extremely worried about this directive, having worked incredibly hard to ensure that risk assessments are undertaken, and the appropriate safety measures are put in place. This ruling will impact not only music teacher's income but also the pupils they teach. It is also in direct conflict with the current Northern Ireland Coronavirus regulations guidance which permits private face-to-face music tuition in private homes 'as long as social distancing measures are maintained and there is no close contact'.ⁱⁱ

We are concerned that a two-tier system has now been created between different settings, although we understand that private homes do not fall under the remit of the Department of Education. We are particularly worried about pupils undertaking GCSE and GCE examinations where the performance element is worth around a third of the overall marks.

Although CCEA have put alternative arrangements in place for summer 2021 grades, the detailed guidance for both GCSE and GCE music state that, "if evidence is generated under less controlled conditions than a qualification assessment, its value may be less than a piece generated under conditions that are similar".ⁱⁱⁱ This means that pupils studying voice, woodwind or brass instruments will be unfairly disadvantaged compared to their peers who study other instruments which are considered 'safe' as they will have to complete assessments outside of school with fewer controls. Pupils studying strings, keyboard and percussion instruments will be able to continue their lessons and therefore improve their skills with expert tuition in schools which again leads to disparity between the opportunities available to pupils.

It is well documented that singing and music-making has a positive impact on young people's confidence, as well as their social, emotional, and educational well-being. As we move out of lockdown, this is needed now more than ever.

I would therefore welcome a detailed response to the questions below:

- What is the evidence base to justify this ban in school setting?
- Why are there inconsistencies in the rules between different settings?
- What steps are your Government taking to ensure that pupils studying voice, woodwind or brass instruments are not disadvantaged?
- Is there any indication that this position may change in the near future as part of the roadmap out of the lockdown?

Yours sincerely



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ⁱ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/RETURN%20TO%20SCHOOL%20FOR%20ALL%20PUPILS%20CONFIRMED%20FROM%2012%20APRIL%20AND%20FURTHER%20CORONAVIRUS%20GUIDANCE%20FOR%20EDUCATIONAL%20SETTINGS.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/Support/General/2021/Summer%202021%20Alternative%20Arrangements%3A%20GCSE%20Music%20Subject%20Guidance.pdf>
<https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/Support/General/2021/Summer%202021%20Alternative%20Arrangements%3A%20AS%20and%20A%20level%20Music%20Subject%20Guidance.pdf>