



**PRESSURE:** Education Minister Peter Weir has had a difficult few months as schools grapple with the impact of the pandemic  
**PICTURE:** Liam McBurney/PA

# Postponing transfer tests has gone from being bad decision to calamitous one

**T**HE first term of school is coming to an end and teachers will rightly be catching their breath and a much deserved break over the Christmas and New Year period.

It seems like an eternity ago that schools were being prepared for the return of children and staff after the five-month hiatus from in-class learning from mid-March through to mid-August. Whilst the period of remote learning was inevitable, it left an impact on children which our teachers have been working heroically to address in the months since schools reopened.

The teacher-haters, empowered by the frustrations and anxieties of parents during the government-imposed school lockdown, have been all but silenced. It is not without irony that many working from the relative safety and comfort of their socially-distanced living rooms, communicating exclusively via phone and email, still felt able to criticise teachers who have effectively abandoned any notion of a safe, socially-distanced workplace as they continue to work for six hours a day in cramped classrooms of up to thirty children, five days a week.

The education minister, Peter Weir, has had a torrid few months and there is little sign of things getting better for him. His is a difficult job, not helped by the widely held perception that he is disconnected from the realities of the pressures and challenges facing school leaders, teachers and students.

The executive's decision to close schools in mid-October for a two-week period was clearly vindicated by a comparison in the numbers of children and school staff members having to self-isolate immediately before and after the imposed break. Yet the minister had to be dragged kicking and screaming into reversing his position and supporting the move long after it appeared the logical thing to do.

Last summer, he was forced into an embarrassing U-turn over GCSE and A Level grades, and he has been the

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subject of considerable criticism due to his failure to move more quickly in outlining his plans for GCSE, AS and A Levels next summer. His refusal to follow Scotland's lead and move towards centre-based assessment will only intensify the criticisms in the event of a third wave precipitating anything like the level of student absences from and instability within schools in the new year. Another U-turn may yet beckon for the minister on that one.

As an avowed supporter of academic selection, there never was a prospect of Peter Weir moving to cut this term short by a week or two for one over-arching reason: the proximity of the transfer tests.

Weir's commitment to academic selection is unwavering and sits uneasily alongside his genuine interest in tackling educational underachievement. The first AQE test will be sat by children in non-Catholic grammar schools on Saturday January 9, meaning that the past week represented the last full week of

schooling for many Primary 7 children before that exam.

Whilst many criticised the wisdom of retaining the tests at all in this year, postponing the transfer tests until January has gone from being a bad decision to a potentially calamitous one.

There are four tests that will be sat by Primary 7 kids in January on successive Saturdays, and there is every indication that virus transmission rates will mean it is extremely likely many will be caught up self-isolating when they are supposed to be sitting the tests.

Peter Weir has put all his eggs in the transfer test basket and has refused to devise a contingency plan precisely because he does not want to countenance any move away from selecting kids at age 11. He knows that academic selection can only be retained through the use of tests that are independently designed, invigilated and marked. Primary schools do not have the breadth of robust assessment data on children to be credibly assigning grades even if teachers were inclined to make the mistake of getting involved in a process which would be both overwhelmed and undermined by parental pressure and litigation.

As an executive minister and prominent member of the DUP, Peter Weir cannot escape responsibility for the fact that his party's refusal to support a lengthier and more effective lockdown last month has left us with soaring rates of virus transmission, bringing the health service to its knees.

Grammar schools are due to publish their admissions criteria in early February. A significant minority of them took the decision before the end of June to move away from academic selection as the basis for admitting pupils next September. A third wave in January has the potential to wreak havoc with a transfer test schedule which could yet force others to follow suit.

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## ON THIS DAY

DECEMBER 21 1920

### Peace Recedes

THE Press Association says that the following telegrams have passed between the Prime Minister and Fr Michael O'Flanagan [Vice-President of Sinn Féin]. In his telegram to Mr Lloyd George dated 17th December, Fr O'Flanagan says: 'While sending through a message of peace and goodwill to the people of Ireland, your government have intensified their fiendish attacks upon our lives, our liberties and our property. How hollow your fair words read in the newspapers, sandwiched in between the burning of Cork and the murder of Canon Magner ... If you really wish for peace, allow the Constitution adopted by the Irish people at the last general election to perform its legitimate functions. ... Then arrange the terms of a Treaty by direct negotiations with the official head of the Irish nation, President de Valera. ...'

The British Prime Minister replied: 'I had hoped ... it might have been possible to reach an understanding which would put a stop to strife in Ireland ... I have never failed to make it clear that there was no possibility of settlement so long as Sinn Féin demands an Irish Republic... [and] ... persists in trying to propel any settlement by the methods of assassination and violence...'

### Specials' Display in Enniskillen

SHORTLY after seven o'clock yesterday morning while a large number of the Fermanagh Special Constabulary recruits were passing St Michael's Catholic Church, Enniskillen on their way to the railway station, a shot was heard. It was subsequently discovered that a portion of the moulding at the entrance to the church had been smashed.

At a special meeting of Enniskillen Urban Council, the chairman (Mr Joseph P Gillin, Nationalist) said that up to the present they had no trouble or annoyance in Enniskillen. As chairman, he considered it his duty to call attention to the action of some members of the Fermanagh Special Constabulary. On Thursday evening, after taking the Oath of Allegiance, they marched through the town and their conduct was most provoking. He congratulated the people on their patience under such provocation. When passing through the streets some of the Specials shouted, 'To hell with the Pope', 'Up Dolly's Brae' and other expressions.

Mr James Cooper (Unionist) - You are out of order.

The chairman said he was asked to take part in the formation of the Special Constabulary and was thankful that he had had nothing to do with it.

As the Clune peace initiative recedes, the reckless, sectarian behaviour of the Specials as they passed the church in Enniskillen confirmed the worst fears of their nationalist critics. Within months, the USC would be defending the new border as the northern state hardened into permanency.

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