

Vienna, 27th April 2020

Dear Parents and Guardians,

The last few weeks have been particularly stressful for you. Many of you have had to adapt to working from home. At the same time, the school system is being run on a scaled-back basis and lessons have moved online. This was not an easy decision for the Federal Government or for me as the Education Minister. However, it was essential in order to protect our population and all those learning and teaching in our schools.

In a short period of time, we have developed distance learning models, taken great efforts to improve the digital equipment of our pupils, and made digital teaching and learning content available. We have set up a hardship fund for school trips and events that did not take place in order to help parents and guardians where cancellation costs are not refunded. And we have developed a model to enable the Matura and school-leaving examinations to be held in the time of the coronavirus.

However, school is much more than just a place of learning. Equally important are the social contact and friendships in the classrooms, and interactions with other children and young people and with the teacher as a person of trust. All this makes it important to re-open schools for our society.

Since early April, we have seen the number of new infections stabilise. In many areas of public and business life, an attempt is now being made to establish a new normality and resume work. After careful consideration and in consultation with the Federal Chancellor and the Health Minister, it is now time to take the next step in the education sector.

To this end, we have developed a clear strategy based on the following key elements:

- Schools will not reopen for everyone at the same time.
 - We will first reopen schools for older pupils who need to obtain school-leaving qualifications. Matura students will return to school on 4th May, as will all pupils in their final year of vocational education.
 - The second stage is planned for 18th May. Schools will reopen for all 6 to 14 year olds, i.e. pupils attending primary schools, the lower cycles of academic secondary schools (*AHS-Unterstufen*), new secondary schools (NMS) and special schools.
 - If all goes well and infection rates do not start to rise again, this will be followed by the third stage on 3rd June. Face-to-face teaching will resume at pre-vocational schools (*Polytechnische Schulen*), the upper cycles of academic secondary schools (*AHS-Oberstufen*), schools for intermediate vocational education (*berufsbildende mittlere Schulen*) and colleges for higher vocational education (*berufsbildende höhere Schulen*).

The second and third stages will each begin on a Friday – with a meeting of the teaching staff to ensure that the school is well prepared for pupils to return the following week.

- School life will be organised according to the following five principles:
 1. Pupils taught in shifts to aid social distancing
 2. Curriculum: less is more
 3. Teachers to use discretion when assessing performance
 4. Compliance with hygiene regulations
 5. Exceptions for specific groups of people

I have asked headteachers to announce how pupils will be divided up for shift teaching:

- by 4th May for pupils at primary schools, new secondary schools and the lower cycles of academic secondary schools, and
- by 15th May for all other pupils.

This will give you time to organise your daily work routine and for your family to adapt to the new situation. Your child's school will provide you with more detailed information.

For all pupils who come to school, we will ensure that strict hygiene requirements are in place as schools gradually resume their normal activities. If, however, you choose to keep your child off school because of worries about his or her health, your child's absence will be recorded as authorised. Please let the school leadership team or class teacher know; your child can then complete the relevant school work at home.

We know that this approach is a balancing act. It is the result of weighing the protection of health against our duty to guarantee educational and career opportunities for our children and young people in the medium and long term. Please help us ensure the success of this approach.

I would like to wish you and your family all the best. Together, we will be able to successfully prepare our children and young people for the future despite the coronavirus.

With best wishes,



Heinz Fassmann

Prof. Heinz Fassmann
Federal Minister for Education,
Science and Research