



16 April 2020

Support staff unions' statement on the re-opening of schools

As the unions representing school support staff – UNISON, GMB and Unite - we represent over half the school workforce. Our members have been essential in keeping schools open during the Covid-19 crisis for vulnerable children and children of key workers. Our members include teaching & classroom assistants, administrative and site staff, cleaners, lunchtime supervisors, catering staff and many more.

Suggestions in the media that the government in England is considering reopening schools has caused huge anxiety amongst school staff and parents, since it is impossible - even with the small number of pupils currently in schools - to maintain social distancing at all times. It is therefore vital that staff and parents are reassured about the government's plans.

We call on the government to provide immediate reassurance to staff that any strategy for re-opening schools is discussed with relevant unions and other bodies at an early stage. Any proposals must be shared well in advance of any implementation, and re-opening schools should only happen once there is clear published scientific evidence that can command the confidence of the schools' workforce that it is safe to do so. School support staff are very clear that the health of children, staff and their families is the principal concern.

Given the increased risk to staff, pupils and their families of exposure to the virus and increased risk of spread by schools re-opening, compounded by the huge difficulties in maintaining social distancing and hygiene measures such as hand-washing in schools, we ask that the government shares:

- The different options the government may be considering, such as phased returns by school type, year group or pupil numbers in each class.
- Modelling carried out for any of the re-opening options being considered, including the impact on the number of cases of Covid-19 and consequent deaths amongst staff, children and their families and carers.
- Plans for regular testing of children and staff, including consideration of testing prior to a school opening.
- Plans to ensure appropriate levels of PPE are available to staff and children where necessary – current government guidance on PPE in schools is wholly insufficient and places our members at increased risk.
- Clear guidance and protocols around situations where close contact with children is inevitable, including the administration of medicine and restraints.

- Plans to ensure cleaning supplies are adequate and there is availability of outside agencies to conduct professional 'deep cleans' where cases of Covid-19 are identified.
- Considerations being given to the protection of children and staff who are in vulnerable health categories, over 70 or pregnant, staff living with people in these categories, the proportion of staff who will be self-isolating/shielding under any given timetable, and the proportion of staff likely to be off sick at any one time.
- Considerations being given to the impact on public transport demand, and how risks will be minimised for drop-off/collection of children at school, walking buses, multiple families walking their children to school and congregating in school grounds.

We also call on the government to provide the necessary additional funds to schools and local authorities to help support the most vulnerable pupils and home learning during this period of partial school closures.