



Joint Education School Staff Unions
c/o Education Services, UNISON
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Gavin Williamson
Secretary of State
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
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18th September 2020

Dear Secretary of State

We are writing out of concern over the current increase in positive cases of coronavirus, and the potential further loss of vital education for children and young people. We understand that you have met with the school teacher unions, but we were not invited. So we are writing to you to offer suggestions borne out of our collective experience of education, with the aim of helping you keep schools open.

Support staff unions worked tirelessly with the government over the summer to try to ensure that schools and colleges would be safe for pupils and staff when they opened in September.

We ignored the vilification of unions in some parts of the media and by some Conservative MPs, who tried to paint us as obstacles to full school/college opening, because the guidance we produced went further than the government's. Our guidance was aimed at making schools safe places and preventing a second wave.

One of our five key tests to ensure school safety was an effective 'test and trace' programme. The government guidance accompanying the decision to fully reopen all schools and colleges was also based on an effective test and trace system.

We also questioned the wisdom of creating large bubbles and warned that increased cases in September could cause significant numbers of staff and pupils to be sent home. Understandably schools and colleges want to protect their local communities where there are cases within a bubble. In the absence of available tests, the rest of the bubble has to move to studying from home until the test result is confirmed. The current situation underlines the need to keep bubbles as small as possible.

Sadly, the failure of the test and trace system, combined with large bubbles, has seen hundreds of schools sending staff and pupils home. Until schools and colleges are supported by a swift and effective track and trace system, the following additional measures are urgently needed where

there is an outbreak, or where additional lockdown measures are in place. Some of these might be reviewed if the test and trace system does eventually become reliable and effective:

- **Ensuring school and college staff are given priority in accessing testing.**

We understand the government's desire to make health and care staff a priority. But school closures also affect the families of NHS and care staff, and undermine the new testing strategy. To ensure schools remain open, school and college staff need priority testing.

- **Reducing bubble sizes**

This would reduce the risks of whole school closures in areas with high rates or in local lockdown areas. At a recent meeting of the schools minister's stakeholder group, some organisations argued against reducing bubble size. Others urged this should be kept under review. The significant increase in the number of bubbles and schools closing in recent days means that this change now needs to be introduced in the form of clear revised guidance. Bubbles should also include before and after-school provision, such as transport, and breakfast and after-school clubs.

- **Tightening the rules on face coverings on school transport**

In Scotland all pupils over the age of five have to wear face coverings on school transport. At the very least, in England rules around school transport should be brought in line with public transport. School buses allow for mixing between bubbles and between schools. The increased demand for school buses has meant transport companies are struggling to mitigate risk. Where necessary, clear masks will enable pupils with additional needs to communicate effectively with adults and their peers.

- **Vulnerable employees**

In areas covered by local restrictions/lockdown, homeworking arrangements should now be introduced for all vulnerable school and college employees. Those who are clinically extremely vulnerable should already be working from home, whether or not their workplace is in an area covered by local restrictions.

- **Clarity about symptoms for children and the circumstances in which parents should obtain a test for their child**

We understand that the Prime Minister is concerned parents are seeking tests unnecessarily. One way of helping address this would be to ensure clarity in messages about symptoms and procedures to follow. The current speculation about whether children exhibit different symptoms, for example suffering from stomach upsets, needs to be urgently addressed.

We appreciate it takes time for symptoms to become officially accepted, as was the case for loss of taste or smell earlier in the pandemic, but the current uncertainty will understandably lead many parents to seek tests that may not be necessary. Parents and schools/colleges also need to know exactly what they should do in all the likely scenarios. This Northern Ireland government [leaflet](#) could serve as a helpful model.

- **Sharing of information about suspected and confirmed cases with staff and parents**

School and colleges need crystal-clear guidance about what information on suspected and confirmed cases among staff and pupils can, and should, be shared with staff and parents,

taking into account data protection issues and the need to protect public health. At present there are different practices amongst schools in the same local area, causing confusion and distrust. Consideration should also be given to other staff including contractors, and those involved in before and after-school provision.

- **Full pay for staff working for companies that provide services to schools**

Companies providing services to schools, such as cleaning or catering, must be required to pay their staff in full and ensure they suffer no detriment during all periods when schools are closed.

It's imperative to remove all financial barriers to compliance with self-isolation guidance by ensuring all staff have access to their contractual wages and are paid as a minimum the real living wage, if they are not already. Where staff are self-isolating, they should be paid their normal wage because they are not off sick. This period should not be calculated as sick pay nor count in any disciplinary process. For reference, here are the current [hourly rates](#) for the real living wage. The importance of these measures cannot be overstated. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that those care homes which offered full contractual sick pay to their staff carried a [lower risk of infection](#) to their residents. In addition, where staff are off sick having contracted Covid-19, too many low paid workers on the statutory minimum sick pay are still having to decide whether to comply and suffer financial hardship or return to work when ill, and potentially contagious, to pay the bills. This pandemic underlines how important access to full sick pay is in protecting the nation's health.

- **Provision of additional resources for cover and cleaning.**

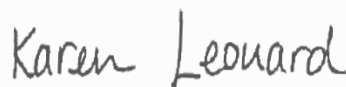
We note that the Scottish government has said it will provide additional resources for teaching and support staff. Additional long-term resources are also needed to cover the cost of enhanced cleaning, both for staff and materials.

We look forward to your early response to these constructive proposals.

Yours sincerely



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