

Date: 30 November 2021

Your Ref:

Our ref: 211130/Zahawi N/PR/LB

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
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NASUWT

The Teachers' Union

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General Secretary
Dr Patrick Roach

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Dear Nadhim,

Omicron and additional Covid mitigations

Further to the publication of your revised guidance in response to the new threat of the Omicron variant of concern.

The NASUWT welcomes the swift response from the Government to the emerging threat of the Omicron variant. It was right that your Department has quickly updated its guidance to schools, colleges and other education settings in response to this new threat. However, we do believe that the Government should go further to ensure that actions taken by schools and colleges are not merely reactive to this rapidly developing situation.

I know that you will recognise that as the virus continues to spread throughout the community, schools and colleges will be impacted. Where mitigations within schools/colleges are not sufficient or secure, the opportunity for the virus to spread is all too clear.

The NASUWT remains concerned that as daily case numbers continue to remain very high, and in light of the identification of the Omicron variant of concern, there will be a need for swift and decisive action to protect public health and to avoid avoidable disruption to pupils' education during the remainder of this term and when schools reopen following the Christmas break. We believe that everything that can be done needs to be done in order to keep pupils in schools and colleges safely.

There are a number of actions that your Department could take to protect pupils' education and to further minimise the risk of disruption. These include:

- Extending the requirement for the wearing of face coverings to include classrooms as well as in communal areas
- In addition to promoting the need for regular twice-weekly LFD home tests to be undertaken and reported, make available additional onsite testing, especially to those schools where there are lower incidence of LFD home tests being reported. Ongoing onsite testing in both the pre- and post-Christmas periods would, we believe, contribute to protecting health and provide greater confidence to schools, parents and pupils.

- Strengthen the rules relating to close contact self-isolation. It is right that a close contact of a person who has tested positive with the Omicron variant should be required to self-isolate immediately. However, it is also clear that capacity across the country at Covid test centres to identify the Omicron variant is not sufficient – we understand this is estimated at just 50% of available Covid testing capacity. This will inevitably delay the identification of Omicron cases and the disclosure of PCR results. In light of this, we believe that a more cautious approach is now needed.
- Use the inspection system to support schools to ensure that all essential Covid-19 mitigations are in place.
- Provide schools and colleges with additional financial assistance to support their implementation of Covid-safety measures, including any requirements to recruit additional staff, equipment and materials.

We believe that these measures are proportionate and could contribute significantly to avoiding further widespread disruption to children's education.

We would be very pleased to discuss with you these and other measures that can be taken in the interests of protecting children's education.

Thank you for your support and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Roach', written in a cursive style.

Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary