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Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/contactus/df

Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary, NASUWT
By email: lynn.bayliss@mail.nasuwt.org.uk

17 December 2021

Dear Patrick,

Thank you for your letter of 30 November, two letters of 13 December, and further enquiries of 7 and 15 December, where you raised issues regarding COVID-19 measures in schools, the Omicron variant, and staff shortages. Please consider this a response to all three.

On Wednesday 8 December, the Prime Minister announced the implementation of Plan B of the 'COVID-19 Response: Autumn and Winter Plan', to reduce pressure on the NHS. This guidance is available at: tinyurl.com/bdcncxvy. Plan B sets out a number of additional measures across society to control transmission of COVID-19. Since then, we have also introduced daily contact testing to further reduce transmission.

I know that we share a determination to ensure schools can remain open to deliver face-to-face, high-quality education to all pupils. We know that not doing so disproportionately affects children and young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Since the emergence of the Omicron variant, we have taken swift action to update our guidance across education settings. Current data suggests that by mid-December Omicron will become the dominant variant in the UK, overtaking Delta. However, while the hospitalisation and mortality rates of the variant are tracked and assessed, these measures remain precautionary.

I know that you and your colleagues are in regular contact with officials in my department and ministers, but I want to take this opportunity to respond to the specific issues raised in your letters.

Face Coverings

Where students and pupils in Year 7 and above are educated, we are strongly recommending that face coverings should be worn by students, pupils, staff, and adult visitors when moving around the premises, outside of classrooms, such as in corridors and communal areas. The same applies to staff and adult visitors in primary schools.

You mention the use of face coverings in classrooms. Directors of public health are able to advise the temporary use of face coverings in the classroom:

- For an individual setting as part of their responsibilities in outbreak management.
- For settings across areas that have been offered an enhanced response package, or are in an enduring transmission area, where settings and directors of public health decide it is appropriate.

Testing and contact tracing in schools

We advise that all staff and students should test over the holidays in line with national guidance. This means that they should test if they will be in a high-risk situation that day, and before visiting people who are at higher risk of severe illness if they get COVID-19. We are also asking all secondary schools to prepare to test their pupils once on-site on return in January. You will agree that testing continues to play a vital role in keeping COVID-19 out of schools.

You also raised concerns regarding the capacity of UK test centres to identify the Omicron variant. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) works to detect cases of the Omicron variant as quickly as possible and has put in place a range of measures to track and prevent it spreading. They are targeting specific locations where we believe that known cases and their contacts may have visited during their infectious period. All targeted tests are sequenced, which includes all positive tests from individuals who have recently arrived in the UK and all positive tests returned by contacts of confirmed cases.

In addition, all positive tests that exhibit the S-gene target failure are sequenced. Approximately half of PCR tests in the UK are able to detect “S gene target failure” (SGTF). This is an early indication that a case may be infected with the Omicron variant and allows for public health action to be taken more rapidly whilst sequencing or genotyping are confirmed. Approximately 60% of labs in the UK can detect SGTF, but all samples from contacts of suspected cases and samples found through targeted testing will get the SGTF test.

Linked to this, I recognise the importance of close contact tracing in managing the emerging Omicron variant, but also how essential it is to keep students in face-to-face settings. That is why on Tuesday 14 December we introduced a new approach to daily testing for contacts of COVID-19, as an alternative to self-isolation. All adults who are fully vaccinated and children aged 5 to 18 years and 6 months, identified as a contact of someone with COVID-19, whether Omicron or not, should take a LFD test every day for 7 days instead of self-isolating. Daily testing by close contacts will help to slow the spread of COVID-19. We also strongly advise these individuals to book a PCR test.

Inspection

You raised the possibility of using the inspection system to support schools in implementing all essential COVID-19 mitigations. The inspection of schools' health and safety measures is overseen by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), which is working with government departments to support a safe environment across all industries.

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974), the duty falls to the employer to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of their employees and others who may be affected by workplace risks. In assessing compliance, the HSE will seek to validate that the relevant duty holder (in this case the employer) has undertaken a risk assessment and identified and implemented sensible, proportionate, and effective control measures which seek to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID-19 within the education setting in accordance with the public health guidelines.

The HSE will continue to assess compliance in education settings and are working with my department to ensure that any changes in public health advice, for example regarding the emerging Omicron variant, is properly reflected in updates and development of my department's guidance.

Mitigations in Schools

As you point out, schools must regularly review and update their risk assessments, treating them as 'living documents', as the circumstances within schools and the public health advice changes. This includes having active arrangements in place to monitor whether the controls are effective and working as planned. Similarly, where schools plan to conduct non-essential events, we trust school leaders to make the right decisions, informed by their own risk assessments of these activities. The new guidance asks all education and childcare settings to revisit their contingency plans based on the latest advice.

You also raised the issue of staggered starts in January. Secondary schools will have the option to stagger the return to school for the first week to accommodate on-site testing. In terms of additional onsite testing, we know that this is a significant ask for schools and I am clear that one on-site test following a period of increased social mixing over Christmas will allow us to identify and isolate positive cases, whilst minimising the burdens on schools.

Additional support and staff shortages

In your letter you rightly raise the issue of the pressure on schools and staff. I would firstly like to acknowledge the incredible lengths that leaders and staff in education continue to go to in order to keep settings open in extraordinary circumstances.

Funding to hire additional supply staff has been made available through the re-opening of the COVID Workforce Fund for schools and colleges to cover absences from 22 November until the spring half-term. The fund covers the costs of teacher absences over a threshold in schools and colleges, for those with high staff absences that are also facing significant financial pressures.

The fund is available to support schools and colleges facing the greatest staffing and funding pressures to continue to deliver face-to-face, high-quality education to all pupils. Further information on the COVID-19 workforce fund is available in our guidance for schools and colleges.

On 16 November, we launched the Education Staff Wellbeing Charter for schools and colleges to sign up to. The charter sets out commitments from the government, Ofsted, schools, and colleges to promote and protect the mental health of the education workforce. We are now encouraging all state funded schools and colleges to sign up to the charter to create a united approach to supporting staff wellbeing. Since the launch, over 700 schools have signed up to the charter.

To support school leaders, we launched a pilot, led by the charity Education Support, to provide peer-support and one-to-one counselling from experts to over 350 school leaders. We have since built on this by providing longer-term support, awarding a £760,000 contract to Education Support to provide peer support and counselling to around 2000 school leaders from this autumn to March 2023.

Regarding equipment and supplies, the government has recently announced it will fund 1000 air cleaning units for poorly ventilated teaching spaces and staff rooms in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision settings, including SEND units in mainstream settings, as well as the launch of a 'marketplace' for all other settings.

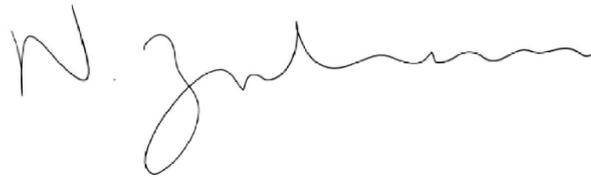
When an education setting places an order for ATS test kits through the online portal, a proportionate amount of PPE is also supplied automatically.

If a school setting is running low on their PPE but has sufficient stock of ATS testing kits, they can request additional boxes of PPE by calling 119 and these will be supplied. We will also continue to make funding available to support schools and colleges with the costs associated with onsite testing, in line with departmental testing policy.

I would finally like to acknowledge that this is an extremely fast-moving situation. We continue to keep these measures under review, especially in consideration of emerging evidence regarding the Omicron variant, in close partnership with health experts and informed by the latest scientific evidence and advice. I am committed to continued engagement with you on these issues, and I appreciate your comments and concerns.

Thank you for writing on these important matters.

Yours sincerely,

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

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education