

Date: 3rd March 2020

Our Ref: 200303/WILLIAMSON G/CK/TF

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Hillscourt Education Centre
Rose Hill
Rednal
Birmingham
B45 8RS

General Secretary (Acting)
Chris Keates (Ms)

Telephone: 0121 453 6150 Facsimile: 0121 457 6208

E-mail: nasuwt@mail.nasuwt.org.uk Website: www.nasuwt.org.uk

Dear Gavin

Coronavirus and Schools

The NASUWT recognises the considerable issues and challenges facing the Government in keeping citizens safe as the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak continues to spread. The Union has sought to adopt a measured approach in relation to the advice given to our members, and we welcome the guidance issued by your Department to support schools. We are ready to work with the Government to ensure that school and college leaders, teachers and the workforce has access to appropriate and relevant information to assist them to maintain public confidence and reassurance about the paramount importance given to the health and safety of pupils and staff.

In recent weeks, and in a context of increased public concern and anxiety, we have, regrettably, witnessed examples of hysteria and unacceptable behaviour which has included verbal and physical abuse of some pupils and school staff on grounds that appear to be racially motivated.

The NASUWT is committed to providing advice, assistance and support to members who experience verbal and physical abuse in the workplace, including where such matters are triggered by fears relating to the spread of Coronavirus. However, in some instances, NASUWT members from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (especially teachers of Chinese origin) have been subject to "jokes", banter, racist name-calling, intimidation, and, in one instance, groups of pupils have been engaged in game-playing including an unsavoury game of tag named after the Coronavirus.

I know that you will appreciate that these incidents have been deeply upsetting to our members and, no doubt, have affected pupils from black and minority ethnic backgrounds also. Given the increasing number of race-related incidents reported to the NASUWT in recent weeks, we do believe that it is appropriate for you to consider extending the guidance that has already been issued by your Department to address this issue.

The NASUWT has published advice on its website for victims of racist abuse, reminding schools of their responsibilities to challenge and address all forms of racism, eradicate racist incidents and to deal with the perpetrators of such incidents. Our advice makes it clear that all schools and colleges are bound by legislation to protect staff and pupils from racial discrimination, harassment or abuse and should have reporting mechanisms for incidents of harassment, bullying and discrimination, including arrangements for reporting such incidents directed against staff.

However, the reports we have received suggest that some schools may be unclear about their responsibility to secure a positive learning and working environment for all pupils and staff, which is inclusive, tolerant and welcoming of diversity. We believe that schools should be encouraged to take a proactive role in promoting an inclusive environment for all learners and for the workforce, whilst also dealing appropriately and robustly with incidents when they occur.

We urge your Department to communicate with schools and provide guidance and support for school leaders, particularly at a time when sensitivities appear to be heightened. Schools, working with parents, will want to ensure that they can deal with issues sensitively and proportionately whilst at the same time taking appropriate remedial action when incidents arise.

I would be grateful if you would give this matter your considered and urgent attention and act to remind schools about their responsibilities to keep all pupils and staff, regardless of background, safe.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Chris Keates (Ms)
General Secretary (Acting)

