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NASUWT

The Teachers' Union

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Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
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Dear Gavin

I am very grateful to you for making the time to meet with the NASUWT throughout the period of the Government's emergency response to COVID-19.

Teachers have, as you have recognised, made a tremendous contribution to public health, meeting the challenge of partial school closure and by continuing to support vulnerable children and children of key/critical workers in school, and in the provision of online learning resources for the majority of children who are at home.

There has been a good deal of speculation about when schools should reopen to pupils and, understandably, concerns have been raised about the impact of partial school closure on the education of children from less advantaged backgrounds. Whilst it is right that these concerns are debated, the NASUWT reminds the Government that the decision to institute the partial closure of schools was made on public health grounds. Any decision to partially or fully re-open schools and colleges must, in our view, be guided by the same overriding public health interest and priority.

As the current situation continues, and as you consider the plans for schooling in the summer term, we have set out five key points that we would ask that you ensure are addressed fully before moving to relax the current arrangements on partial school closure.

It is our strong view that the Government's decision on the partial or full re-opening of schools and colleges must be led by the scientific evidence and advice. Furthermore, it is essential that the scientific evidence and advice drives the policy decision and is not driven to bolster or support a predetermined policy objective. It is essential that lives are not put at risk, recognising that teachers, support staff and pupils and their families remain at risk of contracting the Coronavirus.

The NASUWT urges that when the current restrictions governing partial school closure are relaxed or lifted, it is important that the Government takes fully into account the concerns of those working in schools and colleges. In particular, the NASUWT would expect the Government should commit to the following:

1. Recognise the impact of Coronavirus on the existing workforce in schools and colleges. A significant number of teachers will be affected by COVID-19 because they are being 'shielded' due to their health status, or because of underlying health conditions, or because they or someone in their household has COVID-19 or symptoms of COVID-19. The Government needs to recognise that with a depleted workforce in schools and colleges, this will impact on support and provision available for pupils, with potentially smaller class sizes and fewer pupils or classes in school/college on any given day.
2. The Government will also need to ensure that teachers are guaranteed the same protections as other workers, as provided for in the Government's general COVID-19 advice to employers and employees. Furthermore, the Government could act to ensure that supply teachers are guaranteed employment in schools to assist in addressing staff shortages, by enabling local authorities to organise dedicated teacher supply pools and ensuring that schools have the additional funding they may require.
3. Where the incidence of COVID-19 remains in the general population, it is important that teachers and those working in schools are protected from the spread of the virus as far as possible. Access to PPE, including universal access to soap and hot water, is essential in every setting to enable teachers and pupils to wash hands regularly. In addition, other items of PE, including gloves, aprons and in some instances face masks for those working with children with particular learning needs, will be essential. The NASUWT would expect your Department to set out its plans for ensuring the adequate and effective provision of PPE into schools, and recognise that decisions on the re-opening of schools must also take account of the challenging context of PPE supply.
4. Social distancing is recognised as a critically important strategy in the fight against COVID-19. However, it is widely recognised that stringent social distancing practice is difficult to achieve in certain educational contexts, including working with the early years and with some children with SEND. The NASUWT urges the Government to publish advice to address the concerns we have raised regarding social distancing in certain settings. Furthermore, any decision to re-open schools wholly or partially must also take account of the potential consequences for practising stringent social distancing. This may necessitate fewer pupils in classes and fewer classes able to be in schools at any one time. Physical space constraints in many schools must also be addressed as part of any guidance issued by your Department.
5. COVID-19 risk assessments undertaken in consultation and agreement with the workforce and trade unions must also be an overriding requirement prior to re-opening schools and colleges. In addition, regular cleaning, including deep cleaning, will also be essential in securing the confidence of parents and teachers when schools re-open. It is vital that schools have the necessary cleaning resources and staff to undertake cleaning tasks. The NASUWT would not expect teachers to be asked to undertake cleaning tasks or to be expected to undertake them to the necessary standards to protect the health of pupils and the workforce.

The NASUWT recognises that children's education has been disrupted as a result of this global pandemic. Our members continue to work hard to ensure that every child has access to learning whether in school/college or from home. Children will need support, not only from teachers and other school staff, but by other agencies that can assist every child to access learning opportunities whether they are in school/college or staying at home.

At a time of national emergency, teachers have not been found wanting. It is essential that the needs of the workforce in schools and colleges are considered carefully and addressed fully, with clear undertakings from your Department before committing schools and colleges to reopen their doors.

I look forward to hearing from you and the opportunity to work with your Department to address these important concerns.

Yours sincerely

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

Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary