

Date: 6 May 2020

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Peter Weir MLA  
Minister of Education  
DENI  
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By email: [Private.Office@education-ni.gov.uk](mailto:Private.Office@education-ni.gov.uk)

Dear Peter,

In advance of any anticipated announcements regarding the management of schools during the on-going Coronavirus emergency and with regard to the speculation on the relaxation of the current restrictions on school opening.

In order to secure the confidence of the teaching profession, we have said that it is the primary responsibility of Government to protect public health whilst also ensuring that the health and safety of teachers and other frontline workers is also protected. In reaching any decisions to reopen schools, the NASUWT once again urges you to ensure that such decisions are made on the basis of robust scientific evidence and, in order to ensure the health and safety of those working in schools, we must insist that you set out your plans to ensure that:

- (i) repurposed schools will be able to operate appropriately with regard to health and safety and other considerations, with significantly fewer staff available due to the impact of the Coronavirus and the need to protect those who are shielding, or who are in vulnerable groups or who have underlying health conditions, as well as the potential impact arising from the Government's 'test, track and trace' programme.
- (ii) teachers are guaranteed fully the same protections as other workers, including ensuring that all schools and colleges adhere strictly to the UK Government published guidance.
- (iii) whilst the incidence of COVID-19 remains in the general population, teachers and others working in schools have access to PPE to ensure that they are protected from the spread of the virus as far as possible.
- (iv) schools are organised appropriately to ensure the practice of stringent two-metre social distancing.

- (v) COVID-19 risk assessments are undertaken appropriately and effectively in all settings prior to and during any phased reopening of schools, in consultation and agreement with the workforce and trade unions. In addition, your Department will need to set out its expectations in detail to ensure regular and effective cleaning and hygiene practices in schools prior to and following any reopening.

In the context of the increased speculation about the possible reopening of schools, we must also highlight to you the very serious concerns of teachers about any prospect of partially or fully reopening schools prematurely. Such speculation has given rise to deep anxiety for many teachers and parents.

Teachers are dedicated professionals who are committed to meeting the learning needs of children and young people. However, teachers cannot do this if their health and safety is put at risk or in circumstances where a teacher's health is perceived to be at risk of being compromised. The NASUWT has expressed to you previously the need for the Government to make clear, in consultation with the profession:

- the purpose for the reopening of schools;
- the priorities for reopening schools;
- a national plan for relaxing the current restrictions on the opening of schools which all schools must follow;
- what schools must do in practical terms in order to prepare for reopening.

Parents and pupils must also have time to prepare.

However, it has become increasingly clear, especially in the absence of clarity in respect of the above matters, that the suggestion by some of an arbitrary date (e.g. 1 June) for the reopening of schools is wholly premature. With the highest COVID-19 mortality rates in Europe, it is clear that Government must continue to adopt an extremely cautious approach which does not contribute to further deaths and a further intensive wave of spread of the virus in the UK.

The national COVID-19 response must remain proportionate to the on-going public health emergency and the NASUWT recognises the absolute need to maintain efforts to suppress the virus. In this context, the NASUWT is firmly of the view that changing the current restrictions on the opening of schools would be highly premature and extremely damaging.

Schools must be reopened only when it is safe to do so. In view of the continued and pressing public health challenges and the considerable task that will be required to ensure that every school is ready to admit increased numbers of children and adults into safe learning and working environments, the NASUWT urges you to act to end speculation on the reopening of schools beyond the current restrictions prior to September 2020.

I trust that our concerns will be considered positively and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Roach', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Patrick Roach  
**General Secretary**