

Date: 18 May 2020

Your Ref:

Our ref: 200518/Williamson G/PR/FC

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
Great Smith Street  
London  
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# NASUWT

## The Teachers' Union

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General Secretary  
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Dear Gavin,

I wrote to you on 16 April setting out a number of conditions that would need to be met in order to provide a basis for the successful wider reopening of schools to more children, including:

- (i) the need for the Government to demonstrate that its decisions in respect of schools are led by the scientific evidence and advice and address the concerns of teachers and those working in schools and colleges;
- (ii) the need for Government and employers to act consistently to protect those teachers 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;
- (iii) the 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;
- (iv) the need to ensure that where the incidence of COVID-19 reproduction/transmission 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, including with access to PPE, and the practice of stringent social distancing;
- (v) the need for robust COVID-19 risk assessments to be undertaken in consultation and agreement with the workforce and trade unions prior to any re-opening of schools and colleges, together with the need to ensure regular cleaning, including deep cleaning, prior to and when schools re-open.

Regrettably, these conditions remain matters of principal concern to NASUWT members.

I want you to be in no doubt of the NASUWT's commitment to ensuring children can return to education as quickly as possible and when it is safe to do so. The NASUWT recognises the tremendous effort that has been made by teachers in continuing to support children's learning following the Government's decision to partially close

schools from 23 March 2020. However, notwithstanding the Government's priority for the phased reopening of schools, the bottom line is that no teacher or child should be expected to return to school until it can be demonstrated that it is safe for them to do so.

On 14 May 2020, the NASUWT surveyed the views and experiences of teachers in respect of schools' preparations for wider reopening from 1 June. In a short window of 4 days, an overwhelming response has been received from some 29,000 teachers.

Key findings from the NASUWT survey are:

- 93% of teachers find the Government's plans for 1 June reopening confusing;
- 95% of teachers expressed concern and anxiety about the Government's plans for the wider reopening of schools;
- 85% of teachers do not think it will be safe to return on 1 June;
- 92% of teachers believe that social distancing will not be possible to achieve or will present a major issue in schools;
- 91% of teachers are not confident about the proposed measures to protect their health or the health of children;
- 87% of teachers believe that PPE is essential to protect against the transmission of the virus in schools;
- 92% of teacher did not feel reassured by the Government's announcements that it will be safe for more pupils to return to school/college from 1st June
- On the Government's advice that children and young people should remain in the same small groups at all times each day, and different groups are not mixed during the day, or on subsequent days, 72% of teachers did not believe that this was workable/practical in their school/college.
- On the Government's advice that schools should reduce children mixing by staggering lunch breaks or by bringing lunch into classrooms, 48% of teachers said that this was not workable/practical in their school/college.
- On the Government's advice that schools should ensure that toilets do not become crowded by limiting the number of children or young people who use the toilet facilities at one time, 64% of teachers said that this was not workable/practical in their school/college.
- 87% of teachers disagreed with the Government's advice for schools and colleges that PPE is not required
- On the Government advice that classes should be halved to assist with social distancing, 91% of teachers said that this did not give them confidence about the measures to protect their health and the health of children.

- 87% of teachers said their employer had not shared with all staff a workplace risk assessment.

In addition to the need to be led by the scientific evidence, I have previously asked you to address the concerns of the teaching profession regarding the health and safety conditions that need to be met prior to the wider reopening of schools. Regrettably, in the absence of such clarity, it is not surprising that only a minority of teachers (just 37%) express confidence that their school/college would take the steps necessary to be COVID-secure prior to wider reopening.

It is evident that further work is needed urgently by the Government to secure the trust and confidence of teachers in meeting your aim to secure the wider reopening of schools from 1 June. The meeting with the Government's scientific advisors held on 15 May 2020 did not provide the necessary information or assurances. We note that the Government continues to assert that it is privy to scientific advice from SAGE which indicates that it is safe to reopen schools to more children. We are also aware from the limited published materials available that SAGE has considered schools on a number of occasions. However, there is very little information in the public domain on the detail of these considerations. Whilst the Government may assert that the aim to reopen schools from 1 June 2020 is based on the scientific evidence/advice, in practice the decisions to reopen schools rest with employers in consultation with staff and unions. To this end, it is essential that the information and evidence on which the Government is relying is now provided to the stakeholders who will be responsible for the consequences of decisions on the wider reopening of schools.

On the basis of the information and evidence available thus far, we remain unconvinced that wider reopening of schools from 1 June is appropriate or practicable.

The NASUWT welcomes the undertaking you gave at the Downing Street Press Briefing on 16 May 2020 to discuss a way forward which will help to ensure that schools can reopen safely to more children. We believe that urgent and detailed discussions are now needed with those representing teachers and the wider workforce in schools to secure the progress needed.

Schools are looking to the Government for clear and unequivocal guidance on the health and safety measures they will need to have in place prior to reopening. It is now imperative that the Government takes every available opportunity to provide the necessary assurances that teachers are seeking. Teachers are also clear that the Government must provide the scientific evidence and modelling on which the decision for the phased reopening of schools from 1 June is predicated.

The NASUWT is committed to discussing with you the steps needed to provide the reassurance for teachers and how your guidance for schools can be strengthened, together with urgent and necessary actions by your Department to:

- a) ensure that employers discharge fully their statutory obligations in respect of the health and welfare of staff and pupils;
- b) make clear to all schools and colleges the actions that they are required to take to prevent/minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission;

- c) affirm the actions it will follow to monitor and review schools' effective compliance on measures to safeguard the health and safety of staff and pupils.

I look forward to an early opportunity to discuss in detail your response to teachers' concerns in order that we can move forward confidently in the interests of all children and young people.

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**