



The Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

8 October 2021

Dear Secretary of State

We are writing as unions representing school leaders, teachers and support staff to urge you to give all education settings the guidance and resources they need to keep pupils safely learning for the rest of this term. We began this term hoping for better times and a more normal feel across the education system but, as the weeks have gone by it has become clear that the DfE guidance published on 23 August requires urgent updating.

Thresholds in the DfE contingency framework for even seeking advice following cases are set too high; meaning that cases can already be spreading across a school before additional measures are considered.

Government data shows that confirmed Covid-19 cases amongst school-aged children surged to 102,000 on 30 September, a 67 per cent rise since 16 September. Over 204,000 pupils were absent from school on 30 September for covid-related reasons. Staff absence is also impacting on education with some children suffering disruption as a result of staff absence, and staff and leaders under enormous strain as a result.

It is unclear when the impact of the vaccination programme for 12- to 15-year-olds will begin to be felt and so in the meantime more needs to be done to prevent the spread.

Many other countries in Europe that have kept in place proportionate mitigation measures in schools, such as face coverings and quarantine of close contacts whilst rolling out a vaccination programme, and have not experienced the back-to-school surge in cases that we have seen in England.

In addition, a growing number of councils are now using the freedoms they have under the Department for Education guidance to bring in additional mitigations in schools. This reflects their responsibilities for public health, and also under health and safety legislation.

Staffordshire County Council for example is encouraging all schools to introduce a range of measures including to stop whole-school assemblies and bring back classroom bubbles and face coverings; all close contacts to get a PCR test; and reintroduction of staggered start, finish and lunch times because it is "time to be proactive" about rising cases.

Additional mitigations have been recommended in areas including Cambridgeshire, City of Wolverhampton Council, Cumbria County Council and in some London boroughs. For example, in Cumbria, siblings of children diagnosed with Covid should be kept at home until their test comes back negative.

These are all important measures that we believe need to be implemented across all schools. Combined with a relentless focus on ventilation, with use of HEPA filters where ventilation cannot be improved in any other way (a focus which will reap benefits far beyond the end of the pandemic) these measures could make a real difference in England.

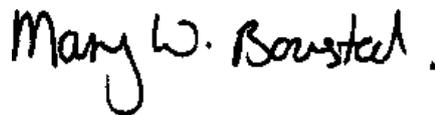
Without a change of direction, we risk damaging the education of thousands of children at some point before Christmas. The health of some children, but particularly that of vulnerable staff, parents or grandparents, could be compromised.

This is an urgent problem, and we look forward to your swift response. We would also welcome the opportunity for an urgent meeting with you to discuss these matters further.

Yours sincerely



Joint NEU General Secretary



Joint NEU General Secretary



GMB National Officer



Unite National Officer



UNISON Assistant General Secretary
Bargaining, Negotiating and Equalities



NASUWT General Secretary