

Date: 26 October 2020

Your Ref:

Our ref: 201026/Williamson G/PR/FC

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

The Teachers' Union

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General Secretary
Dr Patrick Roach

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Dear Gavin,

The NASUWT has raised with you and your officials on numerous occasions the importance of securing an education recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic that ensures that no child is left behind. Our members have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to provide support for children's learning during the period of the national lockdown, and to ensure the safe provision of teaching and learning as schools reopened at the start of the autumn term. However, we are seriously concerned that our members' best endeavours on behalf of children and young people are being seriously undermined.

You have introduced a statutory Temporary Direction requiring all schools to provide remote education for pupils who are unable to attend school. Notwithstanding that we remain unconvinced that such a Direction was necessary in the first place, it remains of concern to our members that the infrastructure needed to support effective remote teaching and learning is not in place and that such provision is further being undermined by your Department in relation to your decisions in respect of the provision of laptops for children, the refusal to fund provision of free lunches for children, and the decision to cut funding for Unionlearn.

Alongside your announcement of 250,000 additional laptops for the poorest children, our members are reporting to us that they are yet to see these additional laptops being provided to enable them to support children who are forced to stay at home. Furthermore, it is of serious concern to us that your Department chose to notify schools on the eve of half-term, of changes to the criteria for allocation of laptops – i.e. when local coronavirus restrictions are confirmed and where 15 or more children (in years 3 to 11) are self-isolating having been exposed to a confirmed Covid-19 case outside the school community. Feedback received from our members indicates that this will result in the provision of laptops to individual schools being reduced by as much as 80%. This risks placing many children from poor and low income backgrounds at serious further disadvantage educationally during the remainder of this pandemic. Furthermore, this is hampering schools' efforts to meet the requirements for remote education support. We ask you to explain why the criteria for these allocations was changed, to clarify the priorities for allocating these laptops, and to confirm when schools can expect to start to receive these laptops.

The decision in respect of funding for free lunches for children during school holiday closure periods has also prompted concerns. Our members are clear that, in light of the particular circumstances arising from the Coronavirus pandemic, many children are at risk of serious harm to their physical and mental wellbeing as a result of the decision to not provide support for free lunches. Our members are also concerned that your decision will further exacerbate the difficulties that teachers will face in meeting the needs of pupils when they return to school after the half-term break. We are again concerned that this decision will further impact on the education of children from poor and low income backgrounds. We ask you to review this decision in relation to provision for future planned and unplanned school closures throughout the pandemic and beyond.

Your proposals to end funding for Unionlearn is of further concern to us. For more than 20 years the Union Learning Fund has supported working people to access skills and training at work. Last year more than 200,000 learners got new skills through union learning, often enabling individuals to gain essential basic skills in reading, writing and use of IT. Unionlearn enables many parents to acquire skills essential to supporting their children's learning, and is especially important where children's access to school is disrupted during the pandemic. Cutting funding for Unionlearn at a time of recession is, in our view, short-sighted and out of step with the priority to equip workers with the skills they will need to adapt to rapidly changing economic circumstances and to better support their children and families. Moreover, it is children in the poorest families who will, once again, be impacted as a result of this decision. The NASUWT asks you to reverse this decision and to invest in learning.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

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

Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary