

Date: 17 November 2020

Your Ref:

Our ref: 201117/Williamson G/PR/FC

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson, MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
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NASUWT

The Teachers' Union

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General Secretary
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Dear Gavin,

I have previously raised with the Government the concerns raised by NASUWT members regarding the management of Coronavirus outbreaks in schools and colleges. I regret that I must write to you again on this matter and the contradictory messages emanating from the Government and public health bodies.

The Government's stated position is clear that individuals are required by law to self-isolate where they have symptoms of Coronavirus, or are contacted by the Test and Trace service, or receive an alert to do so via the NHS Test and Trace App.

The Government's guidance to the public makes clear that where a person has been in close contact with a person who has tested positive for Covid-19, either 48 hours prior to developing symptoms or 48 hours after the person developed symptoms, they will be required to self-isolate. The Government's guidance clearly defines a close contact as meaning:

- having face-to-face contact with someone less than 1 metre away (this will include times a face covering or a face mask has been worn);
- spending more than 15 minutes within 2 metres of someone;
- Travelling in a car or other small vehicle with someone (even on a short journey) or close to them on a plane.

There are now widespread reports from across the country from NASUWT members that these criteria are not being applied in the case of schools and colleges. Furthermore, we are receiving daily feedback that indicates that local public health teams appear to be operating under direction from the Government to disregard the national public health guidance and regulations when dealing with incidents in schools and colleges, and are instead being told to base their decisions on whether or not to self-isolate pupils or staff on the basis of classroom seating plans. In short, to limit self-isolation to pupils sitting immediately next to a child who has tested positive, rather than applying the requirement for self-isolation to members of the child's 'bubble' or group. Our leadership members in schools are also reporting that

they are being challenged unacceptably by public health teams where pupils have been allowed to mix freely with other pupils within the same education bubble in accordance with your general guidance to schools. Again, local public health bodies are citing directive from the Government as the reason for this.

You will appreciate that this situation is causing great anxiety for our members, whose safety will be placed at serious risk by the failure to exercise adequate measures to limit the spread of the Coronavirus. You will recognise that where alternative guidance is being applied on behalf of the Government, this will undermine the integrity of the Coronavirus risk assessments and control measures that have been put in place by school and college employers in accordance with their statutory obligations, leaving employers vulnerable to legal claims.

Furthermore, NASUWT members are deeply angered by the apparent double-standards of the approach being taken vis self-isolation in respect of schools as compared to the Prime Minister's remarks on 16 November 2020 following the decision to self-isolate persons attending a private breakfast meeting at No.10 Downing Street.

We would be extremely concerned if the Government is now basing decisions on self-isolation in respect of Coronavirus outbreaks in schools and colleges on political or operational grounds rather than on the need to safeguard public health. We trust that you agree that teachers, children and young people and their families are entitled to the same protections as other workers and other members of the public.

I must ask, once again, that you confirm what advice your Department has given to local or national public health bodies in respect of the management of Covid-19 incidents in schools.

You will no doubt appreciate the seriousness of this matter and agree that any suggestion that public health advice should be subject to a political objective to keep pupils and teachers in schools at all costs would be wholly inappropriate and unacceptable.

It is essential that swift action is taken to protect public health in the event of any Covid-19 outbreak in a school or college and that pupils and staff who have been in contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 are sent home. I must reiterate to you that it is the expectation of the NASUWT that the Government's advice to schools, together with advice from local public health teams, must put the safety of staff and pupils first.

If it is the case that alternative guidance is now being followed by public health teams, I must ask you to furnish the NASUWT with details of that advice and the scientific advice upon which it is based.

For your information, I have written in similar terms to the Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on this matter.

I look forward to your urgent response.

Yours sincerely,

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

Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary