

Date: 19th October 2020

Your Ref:

Our ref: 202029/HANCOCK, M/PR/EJ

NASUWT

The Teachers' Union

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The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
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Ministerial Correspondence and Public Enquiries
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39 Victoria Street
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By email: matt.hancock.mp@parliament.uk

Dear Matt

The NASUWT has become aware that instructions have been issued to national contact tracers not to pass on confirmed individual positive cases arising in schools to local public health teams. The Union is extremely concerned by this move for a number of reasons.

In May, the Prime Minister promised the UK would have a 'world beating' test and trace system, with such a system vital to keeping the virus suppressed. However, the NASUWT has been deeply concerned that the test and trace system is far from 'world beating' and the current exponential increase in cases is evidence that the system is failing badly. Further reducing the effectiveness by downgrading escalation of school cases will not improve this situation.

As you will be aware, social distancing between pupils was significantly relaxed on the full return of schools, making it likely that a single positive case in a pupil will have the potential to cause further cases. This is especially true in secondary schools where the current scientific evidence indicates that teenagers are as likely to spread the virus as adults. Effective contact tracing is vital to ensure that further potential cases are identified and isolated. As the latest figures show the national contact tracing system is reaching far fewer contacts than local teams, with less than three-quarters of close contacts isolated, failing to escalate single cases carries the clear risk of significant numbers of contacts being missed leading to a substantial outbreak.

Local health protection teams will also have a significantly better understanding of the local context of any school concerned, and be able to tailor the response accordingly for maximum effectiveness. This local intelligence will be missing from the national team.

If the individual case does lead to a larger outbreak within a school, assuming the local team is then notified, they will then face a much larger challenge to identify and isolate further potentially infected individuals, leading to a greater degree of risk to the occupants of the school and more avoidable disruption for both teachers and pupils.

The NASUWT simply does not understand the rationale for this change as it appears a completely retrograde step. If it is due to local teams being overwhelmed by positive cases, removing individual cases is likely to make matters worse in the long run. Local teams must be adequately resourced in order for them to carry out their roles effectively.

The NASUWT therefore strongly urges this directive is reversed immediately and local health protection teams are given the resources to allow them to carry out this vital role effectively.

Yours sincerely,

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

Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary

CC: Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education