

Securing Safe Schools during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Teachers cannot teach and children cannot learn effectively where their health or safety is at risk.

The coronavirus pandemic has delivered an unprecedented impact on children's education, highlighting the need for safe conditions for teaching and learning, without which there will be fewer teachers teaching and more pupils forced to spend time out of school whilst they self-isolate.

Governments and employers have a duty at all times, especially during this crisis, to do whatever it takes to ensure that, where they remain open to pupils, schools/colleges are, above all, safe places for teaching and learning.

During the resurgence of coronavirus transmission in the wider community, the NASUWT urges all governments and administrations to confirm additional measures as a matter of urgency to ensure that schools can remain open safely for children, young people, teachers and support staff.

The NASUWT is calling on the Northern Ireland Executive to:

1. Follow the scientific evidence and advice. The NASUWT insists that the Northern Ireland Executive must heed the warnings from leading scientists and publish in full details of the evidence upon which it is relying to inform its view that keeping schools and colleges fully open will not impact adversely upon pupils, the workforce and their families.
2. Strengthen the guidance to schools and colleges on ensuring COVID-safe and COVID-secure working practices. The NASUWT insists that the Northern Ireland Executive must make clear that safety advice is mandatory and not optional, and must update existing advice to provide the clarity that schools/colleges, the workforce and parents need.
3. Secure the updating and publication of health and safety risk assessments and equality impact assessments by school and college employers. The NASUWT insists that the Northern Ireland Executive takes additional steps to ensure that employers are meeting in full their legal obligations on risk assessment planning, including consultation with employees and unions. The Northern Ireland Executive should also ensure that all school and college employers make available their risk assessments to the workforce, students and parents by publishing risk assessments on the school/college website.
4. Publish weekly data on positive cases of COVID-19 infections of school/college staff and pupils by local government area, together with statistics on the number of pupils and staff by school/college phase who are self-isolating. The NASUWT insists that published Northern Ireland Executive advice is clear that school and college employers must take account of local area statistical data when updating their own risk assessment and control measures.
5. Ramp up inspection and enforcement measures in schools and colleges, including more comprehensive use of spot checks and visits by the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI). The NASUWT insists that to secure public confidence, inspections by the HSENI should include no-notice visits to schools and colleges, and the timely publication of data and reports on COVID-related enforcement notices issued to schools and colleges.

6. Take swift action to protect public health in the event of an outbreak by ensuring that schools/colleges send home pupils and staff who have been in contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19, including all staff or pupils within an affected 'bubble' or group. The NASUWT insists that the Northern Ireland Executive's advice to schools, together with advice from local public health teams, must put the safety of staff and pupils first and minimise the risk of wider transmission by insisting on self-isolation. The NASUWT further urges the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that whilst schools remain fully open, teachers and education staff must be prioritised for COVID-19 testing and for access to any future vaccines.
7. Protect the vulnerable. The NASUWT insists that the Northern Ireland Executive must ensure that those who have underlying health conditions or who are at highest risk (clinically extremely vulnerable) from coronavirus should be required to stay at home, and that individual risk assessments must be provided for teachers who are:
 - clinically vulnerable/extremely vulnerable;
 - pregnant, especially those in their third trimester;
 - BAME background;
 - disabled;
 - aged 60 plus.
8. Strengthen the guidance to insist on effective social distancing in schools/colleges. The NASUWT insists that without effective and stringent social distancing, the Northern Ireland Executive must recognise that school/college employers have an obligation to protect the health and safety of staff by applying other measures to minimise the risk of virus transmissions, including reducing class size, the use of rotas and blended learning, and requiring the use of face masks and face shields in schools.
9. Establish a Northern Ireland plan for remote education/blended and distance learning that is developed in partnership with workforce trade unions, fully funded and underpinned by the provision of effective IT support and resources for all pupils and staff. The NASUWT insists that remote education must be recognised as a necessary but substantially additional expectation on schools and colleges, which cannot be delivered effectively by already overburdened teachers.
10. Provide significant additional financial support for schools and colleges urgently to ensure the safety of staff and pupils, including extra funding for cleaning, personal protective equipment (PPE) and additional supply staff to cover where other teachers are absent. The NASUWT insists that where schools/colleges are facing budget pressures, they should also be prioritised for additional financial assistance throughout the duration of the pandemic.

The NASUWT is committed to keeping schools and colleges open, provided that appropriate measures are in place to keep pupils and the workforce safe. We look to the Northern Ireland Executive and employers to demonstrate their commitment to the safety of children and young people and those who educate them.

The NASUWT will continue to take appropriate action to protect members' health, safety and wellbeing where schools and colleges fail to do so.

