

Date: 21 July 2020

Your Ref:

Our ref: 200721/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,

Face Masks in Schools

I am grateful to you for the opportunity to discuss with you and your officials the issues raised by teachers regarding the full opening of schools this coming autumn. As I have repeatedly raised with you, however, the issue of the wearing of face masks, visors and face coverings in schools continues to be raised by members of the NASUWT.

Your guidance published on 2 July 2020 has belatedly, though helpfully, accepted the need for face masks in certain situations. However, we are concerned that your advice to schools and colleges falls short of what is required at this time, and we are further concerned that the guidance is inconsistent with the revised expectations set by the Government on ensuring public safety at this stage of the pandemic. We are further concerned that as schools prepare for full opening from this autumn, more support is required for teachers who have underlying health conditions, and for those teachers who are pregnant or from BAME backgrounds.

The Government's Coronavirus guidance confirms the public health requirements for the wearing of face masks on public transport and, from 24 July 2020, in shops and supermarkets. We further note that the Government's guidance makes clear to members of the public that 'you are also strongly encouraged to wear a face covering in other enclosed public spaces **where social distancing may be difficult** and where you come into contact with people you do not normally meet.' [*emphasis added*]. We also note that the Government advises that '... employers should consider recommending their use where appropriate and where other mitigations are not in place. For example, there will be times when screens or visors are in use, or when a staff member is not in close proximity to people they do not normally meet and so wearing a covering for staff will not be necessary. Employers should continue to follow [COVID-19 secure guidelines](#) to reduce the proximity and duration of contact between employees.'

Our members have rightly expressed their concerns to us that whilst your Guidance for schools and colleges continues to suggest that face masks should not generally be used, the position in schools is out of step with wider public health guidance and guidance to employers issued elsewhere by the Government where it is recognised

that where physical distancing cannot be assured, face masks should be worn. We are concerned as to the scientific basis for maintaining your current advice to the education sector and we strongly suggest that your guidance for schools should now be brought into line with changes to the Government's guidance for other sectors, public transport, shops and supermarkets. Furthermore, we draw your attention to the position adopted by other UK jurisdictions where the use of face masks and face coverings in schools is encouraged amongst adults and pupils in secondary schools as part of an enhanced approach to reducing Covid-19 transmission.

You have readily accepted that physical/social distancing cannot be practiced within the majority of schools and colleges. It is also increasingly clear that the strategies for minimising contact between pupils and staff (i.e. 'bubbles') are unlikely to be effective given constraints of building design, limitations of space within schools, and the inability of schools to control for wider social interactions involving children and adults within and outside their perimeters. The potential for secondary contacts to occur between pupils and staff who come into contact with other children and/or other adults outside schools is considerable and presents a major weakness in the risk control measures advocated in your guidance for schools.

Whilst we recognise that whilst some children may need reassurance about the reasons for adults wearing face coverings, we do not accept that this should be an impediment to the wearing of face masks in a school context. The NASUWT also believes that where there are concerns that teaching and learning may be impeded by the use of face masks (e.g. in the case of teaching of pupils with hearing impairments), clear facial visors may provide a suitable alternative, and we would therefore ask you to encourage their use within schools and colleges.

As schools seek to finalise their plans for the autumn term, we would ask that your guidance is revised as a matter of urgency to assist the return with confidence of staff in schools who choose to wear a face mask to protect their own health and safety and the health of others.

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