



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

7 January 2021

Sent by email

Dear Gavin,

As you know we have been extremely concerned about the safety of school staff since the reopening of schools in September. We have written to you several times asking for the number of school staff who have had coronavirus and the number hospitalised, we have yet to receive an answer.

Today, we remind you that as recognised trade unions we have rights to information to help in collective bargaining and at the moment we are very concerned to be able to engage in such discussions about the safety of our members as well as the safety of the community.

This discussion might be with employers, or it could be with you as the key decision maker – but through whichever route, you as the Secretary of State, should have access to the information that we request.

We have repeatedly expressed our concern that schools act as vectors of transmission, so we were relieved that the Prime Minister finally accepted that this was also the Government's understanding on Monday evening.

However, following the decision of the Prime Minister and Parliament to restrict school attendance to all but vulnerable children and the children of key workers, you have extended the definition of vulnerable children from those with a social worker or an EHC Plan (about 5% of pupils) to include those who may have difficulty engaging with remote education and others at the discretion of the school or authority. This will potentially substantially increase the number of pupils in school and the numbers will vary considerably from school to school.

You made this decision in the context of the meeting of SAGE on 22nd December, which concluded that, "It is not known whether measures with similar stringency and adherence as Spring, with both primary and secondary schools closed, would be sufficient to bring R below 1 in the presence of the new variant."

You also made it in the context of the current concern about the threat to our NHS. On the Today programme this morning, 7th January, Rupert Pearce, Professor of Intensive Care Medicine at Queen

Mary University of London, said, “unless we take the lockdown seriously the impact on the health service for the entire country could be catastrophic, and I don’t say those words lightly. We really aren’t engaging with the lockdown the way we did the first time.”

So SAGE were concerned that even with measures as they were last March, the R rate may not be below 1; yet you seem to have weakened the stringency of the measures as compared with late March, and other scientists are worried that the NHS could be overwhelmed.

For the purposes of negotiation around our members’ safety we have the following questions arising from this, especially given the context as we understand it:

Pleased can you share all the information you have from PHE and/or SAGE or the Children’s Task and Finish Group, about their estimates of the effects of your new criteria for school attendance on the R rate and infections in schools.

What estimate did you supply to SAGE and PHE of how many more children will attend school in this lockdown?

Did you ask SAGE, the Children’s Task and Finish Group or anyone on these bodies what the likely impact on R would be?

Did you ask SAGE or PHE to advise on the maximum class size for early years settings, primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and special schools? If so, what was their advice?

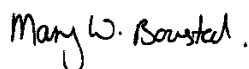
Did you ask SAGE or PHE to advise on the maximum bubble size for early years settings, primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and special schools? If so, what was their advice?

Have you asked SAGE or PHE whether there should be new guidance which recommends additional social distancing measures for schools to apply to limit the level of transmission, given the extra transmissibility of the new variant of the virus?

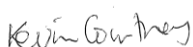
We believe that one way the R rate could be kept below one with greater numbers of children at school than in March would be if you were to make funding available to schools to employ agency staff to facilitate smaller classes in schools that are experiencing difficulties teaching large numbers of pupils on site. Would you be willing to increase the number of staff in order to reduce bubble sizes?

As recognised unions with rights to information for collective bargaining purposes, we expect you to give this your urgent attention and look forward to an early response.

Yours sincerely



Mary Boustead
Joint General Secretary



Kevin Courtney
Joint General Secretary



National Secretary
Education, Local Government,
Police and Justice
UNISON