



National Education Union

Hamilton House
Mabledon Place
London WC1H 9BD

T 0345 811 8111
neu.org.uk

Joint General Secretaries
Dr Mary Bousted BA (Hons) MA PhD
Kevin Courtney

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

11 September 2020

Cc Secretary of State for Education

Dear Prime Minister

We want schools and colleges to be safe, so they can stay open.

We wrote to you on 10 June, putting forward the NEU's education recovery plan. We have received no reply. It is clearly of crucial importance that the education of the nation's children and young people suffers as little disruption as possible because of Covid-19. We believe that measures we outlined in our recovery plan are necessary to ensure that education continues for all pupils, especially for those from disadvantaged families.

It is vital that your Government does everything in its power to ensure schools are safe and to permit them to remain open, for as many children as possible, for as long as possible.

To do that, your first responsibility is to keep case numbers as low as possible and to stop them rising. Cases have risen by 60% in England in the last week and that is of great concern to our union and its members.

We note that you have introduced the new rule of 6 and renewed public health messaging, which we feel has been missing for much of the summer – lost in messaging such as “eat out to help out”. We do hope your steps work but, if they do not, you must go further.

It is clear that your Government must improve the availability of testing and the efficiency of the test track trace programme. We are disturbed to hear from head teacher members that staff are being told they need to travel long distances to get a test: these are staff who are showing symptoms – it is vital that these people get tests and results as quickly as possible.

In many areas of the country, cases are already too high with local authorities being put on watchlists as areas of concern. It is vital that you act now to reassure parents, carers and staff across the whole country, but particularly in these areas.

We call on you to ensure:

- **Regular reporting, including to trade unions, of reviews of all school and college Covid-19 outbreaks, looking at causes, steps taken in response and lessons learnt.**

- **Regular asymptomatic testing of school and college staff and older secondary students**, especially in areas of higher incidence. This would ensure cases were caught faster and transmission networks disrupted as well as providing reassurance. This fits with the idea of your 'moon shot' – but we believe it should start in schools and colleges now.
- **Proactive monitoring of ventilation in schools and colleges and compulsory use of masks** in areas of higher incidence where other mitigations weren't possible. Government-funded provision of medical masks to all staff who are more vulnerable, including those aged over 60 as recommended by WHO.
- **Clinically Extremely Vulnerable staff should be supported to work from home** and that this should be extended to Clinically Vulnerable staff in areas of highest incidence.
- **Emergency efforts are made to reduce class sizes**, especially in the areas of highest incidence. Bigger class sizes lead to bigger transmission networks and our class sizes are amongst the largest in Europe. These class sizes are likely to lead to rota operations in some areas of higher incidence. The Scottish and Welsh Government have employed students finishing their PGCE and BEd courses to help. Your Government should do the same, mobilising both supply and younger teachers to reduce class sizes.
- **Local authorities permitted and resourced to find extra space for schools and colleges, especially in areas of higher incidence to enable them to be less crowded and more able to support social distancing.**
- **A guarantee given to schools and colleges that all Covid-19-related costs, including staffing and health and safety costs, will be fully funded by Government.** School and college leaders are already reporting that the cost of implementing Covid-secure schools is becoming prohibitive. Safety must not be compromised because of financial constraints.

As well as looking at safety and continuity of education, it is vital your Government recognises that you should be supporting schools, and the professionals who work in them, in a number of other ways.

- **Plans must be made, and resources provided, for blended learning – pupils learning at school and college and at home with all pupils having both face-to-face contact and remote learning when this is safe.** This must be resourced by Government and teachers supported to develop blended learning.
- Children and young people living in poverty – their wellbeing, health and access to learning – must remain a key priority. The harm caused by hunger, poor housing and the digital divide will continue to affect millions. 700,000 young people live in homes without internet access. To counter the digital divide and make sure no young person is left behind, the Government must step up its scheme to provide Wi-Fi access and laptops for disadvantaged children.
- **GCSE and A levels must be changed to provide a fair assessment of young people's attainment.** Exams cannot cover all the current syllabus because students have missed five months of school attendance. This situation will affect those in disadvantaged or urban areas disproportionately.

Delaying exams by a few weeks is not sufficient. We wrote to Gavin Williamson on 19 August urging him to make bigger changes to next year's exams in order to build confidence that the grades awarded properly recognise and reward young people's achievements.

In particular, Government should:

Reduce content assessed in GCSE and A-level exams, across all subjects, by making some topics optional to allow for the different order in which content will have been taught across the country.

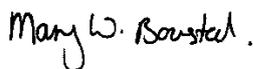
Work with teachers and school leaders to develop a robust national system of moderated, centre-assessed grades in case of a second spike in coronavirus or local lockdowns.

- As **vocational qualifications** are assessed module by module, schools and colleges should be allowed to adapt their assessments this year, with the approval of the exam board, as they were for summer 2020.
- **National testing in primary school**, including the additional phonics check this term, should be suspended for 20-21. All primary national testing is predominantly an accountability measure and will not be comparable to previous or subsequent years.
- **Performance tables** should continue to be suspended for this year. Any data will be a measure of the disruption caused by Covid-19 and not of school or pupil performance. Disruption is likely to affect pupils, schools and local areas which are most deprived. Performance tables will not give a fair picture.

Finally, we share the dismay expressed by other leadership unions that Ofsted will be making school and college visits this term. **In these hugely challenging times for school leaders, Ofsted should only be making visits to schools where there are safeguarding concerns.** Her Majesties Inspectors (HMI) could gather information they need to compile thematic reports on how schools are managing the return to full education of their pupils.

The issues raised in this letter are so serious and pressing that we are making its contents public.

Yours sincerely



Mary Bousted
Joint General Secretary



Kevin Courtney
Joint General Secretary