

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
Westminster
London
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1 July 2021

Dear Gavin

We are writing to express our anger and dismay at the way in which the government is currently treating school and college leaders.

As you know, our members have risen to every challenge thrown at them this year. They have taken on the burden of contact tracing, spending many hours during their evenings, weekends and holidays identifying contacts of positive cases and informing families that they need to self-isolate. They have, at very short notice, set up asymptomatic test sites to test pupils as they returned after Christmas and then the spring lockdown. They have received and distributed thousands of home test kits, and done everything they can to encourage students to use them.

This is on top of implementing the constantly changing government guidance, providing high quality remote education to pupils having to isolate, and (for secondary schools and colleges) the enormous task of determining and quality-assuring teacher-assessed grades – as well as all the usual work involved in running a school or college.

They have done all of this against a constant backdrop of criticism. Only yesterday, the Prime Minister's official spokesperson implied that schools were capriciously choosing to send home more pupils than necessary, telling journalists that this is "something that is being picked up through the regional schools commissioner teams".

Currently, a week before the end of term for some schools, and no more than fourteen working days for most, school and college leaders still have little idea of how they will be expected to run their settings in September. You told Parliament yesterday that you "believe pupils would not be facing bubble arrangements in September", but nothing has been communicated to schools and colleges about this. Your officials have told us that they hope to publish updated guidance "before the end of term", but are not able to commit to a date.

Alongside this uncertainty, there is a growing concern among school and college leaders that the burden of public health responsibilities they are currently carrying may actually increase next year. As the rest of society anticipates the lifting of most restrictions on 19 July, secondary schools and colleges are being asked to set up asymptomatic test sites again in September. It is also currently unclear whether or not daily contact testing may be introduced as an alternative to isolation from September, and if so whether the expectation is that that testing would need to take place in schools and colleges on an indefinite basis. Furthermore, all the thinking to date on this issue appears to relate only to secondary schools, leaving primary schools even more in the dark about what may be expected of them.

We understand from your officials that our members will also be told that they have to spend the first six days of the summer break continuing to contact trace, as they have done during every other holiday this year. The Department has not yet, however, had the courtesy to inform them of this fact. We reiterate, this is a week to fourteen days from the end of term.

We appreciate that we continue to be in a dynamic and fast-moving situation, and that many of these decisions need to be taken across government. We do not accept, however, that it is appropriate to continue to treat school and college leaders with what is, frankly, starting to feel like contempt. We do not accept that the demands on their time over the summer break should be so great that they cannot see how they can take even a short amount of time off to rest and recuperate. And we do not accept that schools and colleges should be expected, on an indefinite basis, to continue to undertake public health duties, to the detriment of our members' health and wellbeing, and to their capacity to focus on providing the high-quality education that children and young people desperately need.

We ask that the government commits, as a matter of urgency, to the following actions:

1. Direct NHS Test and Trace to provide more support to schools and colleges with contact tracing, while this is still required. Urgently, ensure this support is in place for the beginning of the summer holidays. As we have been making clear to the Department for many weeks, large numbers of secondary school and college leaders in particular simply won't be available to do this work for the first six days of the summer break, as this is the only time they can take a break before results days and the subsequent workload involved in managing the appeals process.
2. If there is a requirement for students to be tested on-site (whether on return in September or on an ongoing basis), limit the role of schools and colleges to providing appropriate space (if possible), and organising the throughput of students. The organising and running of the ATS, and the administration of tests themselves where required, should be carried out by an appropriate public health body.

Where individual schools and colleges aren't able to provide appropriate space for testing, alternative approaches must be found, such as the use of mobile test centres or other nearby facilities.

We cannot overestimate the importance of taking these actions immediately and communicating them clearly to schools and colleges. This is imperative if the government is to retain the support of leaders, to ensure public health requirements are adequately met, and to enable schools and colleges to focus on their crucial role of helping children and young people to catch-up and recover from the impact of the pandemic.

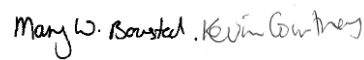
Best wishes



Geoff Barton
General Secretary – ASCL



Paul Whiteman
General Secretary – NAHT



Mary Bousted & Kevin Courtney
Joint General Secretaries – NEU