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Dear Secretary of State,

Support Staff and the Coronavirus

As National Secretary of Education at UNISON, I am writing to you to raise concerns about the current support and advice that is being offered to school support staff and other education support workers during the Coronavirus crisis.

Following your letter which was issued last week to Heads and Teachers, we are deeply concerned that this guidance is not clear or relatable to many other key workers who work in schools.

In the background, UNISON has been working closely with civil servants in the Department for Education to try to ensure that guidance being issued from the DfE works for all staff. We have struggled at times to get our message across, but I recognise that they are very busy and trying their best. In the circumstances UNISON has taken a pragmatic approach and not sought to undermine the Government at this time of crisis.

Sadly, far too many messages have excluded 50% of the workforce – school support staff and other education support workers. This was reflected in a speech you gave last week praising the contributions of heads and teachers and which you have now re-iterated in your letter to them.

You are right they are crucial – but so are support staff. In many schools and local authority hubs most staff working are support staff. Other schools are being totally run by heads and support staff. Support staff are putting themselves at risk by working directly with pupils, many of whom will have parents carrying out key worker roles which increases their risks of exposure to the virus.

The most vulnerable pupils still in school usually respond best to their teaching assistants, and the nature of the care provided often means social distancing between support staff and pupils is impossible to implement, particularly in SEND settings.

We still await guidance around the use of PPE which the DfE has said it will provide. We know that there are videos on the use of PPE for NHS staff that explain what PPE is necessary in what situations and we believe this advice should be made widely available.

Many support staff have volunteered to give up their Easter holidays, yet there has been no guidance on how this will work from your department and there are other issues that specifically affect support staff that have not been addressed.

Finally, I note that you have regularly spoken to Heads and teachers' unions – but again not support staff representatives. UNISON's top priority throughout has been, and will continue to be, to work jointly to support schools and their staff in their leading role in the fight against this pandemic. In these circumstances we believe our different perspective should also be considered.

I would welcome your thoughts on why you and your department have so far ignored school and other education support staff and their representatives and what can be done to address this.

Support staff are now questioning whether we are all in it together after all.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon Richards". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J".

Jon Richards
National Secretary
Education

